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Patent-leather Joe; OR, Old Rattlesnake, the Charmer.

A ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROMANCE.

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HARD CROWD," "THE KIDNAPPER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A GREENY—FLASH LIGHTNING.

"Now, gents, you had better be born lucky than rich. Who's the next candidate for the smiles of the fickle jade? Why soil your hands and make your back ache, grubbing a few grains of the filthy out of the earth, when it's as free as the air you breathe, by only exercising your wits? Now, gentlemen, do you, or don't you? Take it while it's going. Ah! this gent wins. Here you are, sir. I never quarrel with a man's luck. Chuck-a-luck! Chuck-a-luck! Who's the next lucky man?"

His dress was decidedly "loud," his plaid pantaloons being very wide in the legs, his "b'iled" shirt displaying what might or might not be a diamond, and an immense seal ring decorating his finger.

After the manner of his like, he was called Patent-leather Joe.

The "next lucky man" at the moment we open our story, was a "greeny"—that is to say, one who has just come to Virginia City from the "States," knowing as yet only so much of mining and the life of a miner as he had picked up in the newspapers.

Arthur Hamilton had already "tried his luck" at Patent-leather Joe's "little game," until he had only five dollars left. Then he had sat down in a corner in rather rueful cogitation.

Evidently his meditation had been productive of some idea; for he now advanced again to the gambler's table.

"Is there any limitation to the amount of bets in your game?" he asked.

"No. Anything not less than ten cents, or more than my pile."

"And how much is that?"
"Say five hundred dollars. Can you see it?"

The question was sarcastic. "No, not now," replied Arthur, "but that's not

saying I won't be able to before the night is over.

"That's so, stranger. If you clean me out, you won't be the first, or last, I reckon. You're welcome to try."

"Will you play with this understanding—I can bet much or little, as I please; and, no matter how luck runs, who wins or who loses, neither can stop without the consent of the other, until one is dead-broke?"

Again Patent-leather Joe smiled.

"All right," he replied; "I'll agree to that."

"Suppose we write it down, so that there will be no misunderstanding."

And Arthur put the agreement in writing.

"That's all right is it?"

Patent-leather Joe ran his eye carelessly over the paper.

"That's square," he assented.

"Gentlemen," said Arthur, addressing the spectators, "you all hear?"

With awakening interest, the crowd indicated assent.

Then the game began.

Arthur bet ten cents—and lost.

He bet twenty—and lost again.

He bet forty—with the same result.

He bet eighty. This time he won.

Beginning again, he bet ten cents, and won.

Once more he bet ten cents—and lost; twenty

—and lost; forty—won.

Pocketing his winnings, he returned to his first stake of ten cents.

You may well believe it did not take Patent-leather Joe long to drop to this little game.

"Hold on, stranger," he said, "you ain't giving me any show."

"Why not?"

"Why, every time you lose you double, so that when you win—and you're bound to win first or last—you're just ten cents ahead."

"That's so."

"Well, at that rate you can skin me, ten cents at a time."

"What of that?"

"Why, that ain't fair."

You don't give me no show.

"Certainly I do."

"I don't see it."

"Suppose that you had such a run of luck that you kept winning until I could double no longer? you'd rake my pile, wouldn't you?"

"Suppose the heavens should fall! I reckon one side can't win more than half a dozen times running."

"I see nothing to prevent it, if you're lucky enough."

The crowd began to grin.

Patent-leather Joe frowned angrily.

"It's a doggone slim show!"

he muttered, proceeding with the game.

Arthur won steadily until the gambler's patience was completely exhausted.

Suddenly he stopped.

"Look a-hyar, stranger,"

he said, "this won't do!"

"Why not?"

"I might, as well give ye my money out and out, as to fool away my time letting you have it by dribblets."

"I want your money only as I win it."

"That'll do for talk; but the long and short of it is, you've got the dead open and shut on me. You're bound to give me a show, or you can't take my money!"

"But, as I showed you, you still have the chance of breaking me by an unusual run of luck."

"Yes, a doggoned unusual run o' luck! A run o' luck that never happens to anybody. No, boss, that won't go down. You're bound to give me a show that is a show."



"Cap," said the boy, carelessly, "I'm Flash Lightning, miner and prospector. That's who I am. And I mean business!"

"Let me see," said Arthur, referring to the agreement. "I am to bet much or little, as I choose, not under ten cents, not over your pile; and neither is to stop without the consent of the other, until one is dead-broke. I see nothing about giving any show in that."

"Oh, well, that's understood, of course."

"Nothing is understood which is not expressed, in a written agreement."

"Confound your written agreement! Do you suppose I'm going to let any galoot beat me out o' my money in this way?"

"I suppose you're going to stand by the terms of the agreement."

"Blast me if I do, if that's the way you make it out! Stranger, you're welcome to what you've got; and you've learnt me a lesson. But I reckon, now you've got your money back, I say quits."

"Hold on, boss! This thing hain't played out yet. A go's a go; and you've got to stand to it until you're busted. You hear me—Flash Lightning, miner and prospector!"

Everybody looked surprised, and then smiled. The bold challenger was a boy of not more than seventeen years of age.

As he spoke, he drew a pistol and cocked it in immediate readiness for use.

CHAPTER II.

THE BITER BIT—A NEW FRIENDSHIP—BERENICE.

PATENT-LEATHER JOE stared at his young antagonist.

"Who are you, and what do you mean?" he demanded.

"Cap," said the boy, carelessly, "I've just give you my handle—Flash Lightning, miner and prospector. That's who I am. And I mean business!"

"You're a doggoned meddling fool; and you mean to git your mouth slapped!" amended the gambler.

The boy laughed.

"Now I reckon, Cap," he said, "you'd jest like to break me in two. Perhaps you could do it, if it come to muscle. But these little trinkets—referring to his weapons—"make big and little even, if you only know how to handle 'em. And I allow I can hold my own with the best man in the mines. Boss, I reckon you'll have to cave."

With a fierce oath Patent-leather Joe reached for his own revolver.

"Cheese it, cully!" commanded Flash Lightning, bringing his weapon into line with his eye and the gambler's heart.

Patent-leather Joe was nobody's fool. A glance showed him that the crowd was against him, while this determined boy "held the drop on him."

He yielded to stern necessity, with such grace as he could command.

"I reckon you're the gent I've got my business with," he said, sullenly, to Arthur Hamilton. "Of course, you want to do the fair thing?"

"Yes, I want to stand by our agreement," said the young man, quietly.

The gambler scowled.

"That's a clean beat," he said.

"It was a fair bargain."

The gambler thought a moment.

"Stranger," he said, presently, "you've got me. I cave. But of course, you don't want to be too hard on me. The agreement says that either can stop, if the other is willing?"

"Yes."

"You've won back all the money you lost with me?"

"Yes."

"Suppose I give you as much more, and then call the thing off?"

It was now Arthur's turn to make terms.

"Wait until we investigate this thing a bit," he said. "I suppose you will admit that where men bet at random, as they ordinarily do, this game is all in your favor? Although it looks fair, the fact is you are bound to win."

"A man may be lucky enough—"

"No; luck or no luck, from the nature of the game, the odds are all in your favor."

"Well, that may be."

"In fact, is / on the other hand, the way I have played I am sure to win all of your money, if we play long enough."

"That's just what makes the thing a beat."

"At any rate, under the terms of this agreement, I can take all of your pile, if I choose!"

"Yes."

"And if I let you off short of that, I am giving you just so much money."

"I suppose you can call it that."

"How much money have you beat these men out of, when the sure-thing was on your side?"

"I may have won a hundred dollars, perhaps."

"How much had you when you began?"

"A little over four hundred."

"Well, this is how I will let you off—pay these men back their money, and give me two hundred."

"I'm blowed if I do!"

"Very well, then! We'll go on with the game."

"Hold on, pardner! You don't want to skin me like that?"

"I've offered to give you a clean two hundred and over, when I can take the lot just as well as not."

There was no other way out of it. Everybody who had lost money to Patent-leather Joe was immensely in favor of the plan, for a very obvious reason.

"Blast my eyes!" cried one, "I think the gent's doin' a mighty white thing. Blow me if I wouldn't gobble the whole pile if it was my chance."

"Divy up, Joel!" laughed another. "The greeny's got you foul, sure."

A dead-white pallor overspread Patent-leather Joe's face, and set about his tightly compressed lips. His eyes began to glitter, and his nostrils quivered with suppressed passion.

Without another word he spread his money out before him on the table, and began to pay back the several amounts he had won from different miners.

It was not long before there was a disagreement, one of the men claiming more than the gambler awarded him.

Then Patent-leather Joe stopped, and said, in a low, husky voice:

"Pardner, I'm doing a thing that nobody ever heard of before. Seeing I'm in for it, I'll deal square; but blow me if I'll stand any hog! I say that that is what I won from you. Do you give me the lie?"

The miner "caved."

Having satisfied the other claims, Patent-leather Joe handed Arthur Hamilton two hundred dollars out of what was left.

Then he arose, drew himself to his full height, and glanced around on the crowd.

"Gents," he said, slowly, "every dog has his day. It'll be queer if I don't get even with some that are in this room!"

As he ceased speaking his eyes settled upon Flash Lightning, with a scowl of intense hatred.

The boy returned his look with a quiet half-smile.

The gambler turned on his heel and walked out of the saloon.

Flash Lightning grasped Arthur Hamilton's hand.

"Stranger," he said, heartily, "I like your wit. You got him where the hair was short."

"And I," said Arthur, smiling, "like your grit. You held him where I had got him."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the boy, with relish. "You're not slow with your answers. Have you got a pardner?"

"No."

"Nor have I. Suppose we strike hands on it?"

"Agreed!"

"It's a go, then! I'm yours to command, while wood grows and water runs!"

"And I'll back you while I've got a leg to stand on!"

The new-formed friends clasped hands with a gripe that bespoke genuine heartiness.

"This isn't the last we'll hear from Patent-leather Joe," said Flash Lightning, lightly.

"He's an ugly customer."

"He'll always find us at home, won't he?"

"You bet!"

"And now, gentlemen," said Arthur, turning to the crowd, "you will all favor me and my partner, I know. Bartender, we don't want anything but the best."

The crowd cheered the joint heroes of the occasion.

Flash Lightning again grasped the hand of his friend.

"You're a trump!" he said. "Everybody wouldn't have thought to give me a share in this, as you have done. That's the way I want it to be. We're pardners in everything."

"Of course."

Meanwhile, the gambler left the town, walking rapidly through the moonlit night, until he came to a densely-wooded pocket, nestled away among the cliffs where nobody would think of penetrating, unless they chanced to stumble upon its entrance.

Walking down the little valley, he approached the face of a precipice where a dense growth of vines hung like a veil.

Before he reached the spot, an animal came to meet him and fawn about him affectionately. It proved to be a huge bloodhound.

As he drew nearer, a musical voice was heard to say:

"It's Walt!"

Then the curtain of vines was pushed aside, and a young girl of exquisite loveliness shyly awaited his approach.

He quickened his step with a pleased smile of greeting, and spoke her name:

"Berenice!"

Shyly she let him take her hand.

"You are earlier than usual," she said.

He bent until his lips touched her cheek, a caress to which she must have been accustomed, since she did not shrink away, as he said in a low, meaning tone:

"I couldn't stay away from you, Berry. Do you know why?"

CHAPTER III.

BERENICE'S GRIEF—THE SERPENT CHARMS.

As he spoke, the gambler passed his arm about the supple waist of the girl, and drew her further out into the moonlight, so that he could gaze upon her fresh young beauty.

Seen in that light, she was very lovely.

At "sweet sixteen," life in the open air had given to Berenice Granger a roundness of figure beyond her years. Yet in her manner was all the coy timidity of a girl at her first outlook on womanhood.

Her long, flossy hair, that had never known restraint, fell in natural waves to her waist. From its blonde beauty, one had not to look at her eyes to know that they must be of softest blue.

They were full of strange questioning now, as she raised them to Patent-leather Joe's face.

What was it in his manner that thrilled her so? She had never felt it before.

For the first time in her life she began to tremble, feeling herself held so close to his side—feeling his breath on her cheek—feeling (yes, she could feel them!) his eyes upon her.

And the consciousness of something new, something different from all that had gone before, startled her with a sort of vague apprehension.

Patent-leather Joe knew, though the girl did not, why she looked up at him uneasily and half drew away from him.

For the first time a thrill of passion had crept into his caress.

He had always designed her for himself, and had watched her growing from year to year, noting jealously every budding charm; but until now he had always regarded and treated her as yet a child.

To-night, for the first time, he gazed upon her as a woman. To-night, for the first time, his heart glowed and his pulses beat high with a delicious thrill of exultation, as he gazed upon her, and felt that the fruition of his hopes was near at hand.

Patent-leather Joe was not a good man. In his love there was nothing of that half-wondering reverence which sets its object apart as something sacred above others of her kind. And when, without waiting for her answer to his question, he bent and kissed her on the lips, his kiss was hot with passion, instead of being tender with affection, as it should have been.

Perhaps an intuitive perception of this was conveyed to the pure heart of the girl.

She caught her breath and sought to disengage his arm.

"Don't, please," she said, in a low, startled tone.

Still she had no clearly-defined fear of him, or repugnance toward him.

"Don't draw away from me, Berry," he said gently. "Let us walk in the moonlight."

"Want to talk to you."

As he now took her hand, in the old familiar way, the girl yielded herself readily to his guidance. The momentary lifting of the veil only left a faint flush on her cheek and a dreary thoughtfulness in her eyes.

After they had walked in silence a moment he asked:

"How is Aunt Sue?"

"This has been one of her dull days," answered the girl. "Yesterday she wept a great deal, and wandered more than—"

"What did she say?" interrupted Patent-leather Joe, a little nervously.

"Nothing connected. She kept talking to Andrew, telling him that he had deceived her."

and broken her heart. She begged him to bring back her baby-boy. If he would only do that, she would forgive him every thing."

Shaded by his hat-brim, Patent-leather Joe's face underwent a variety of expressions while the girl was talking.

There was cold, relentless hatred, and gloomy remorse; there was white-tipped anger, and humid-eyed pity, and perhaps a faint quickening among the dead embers of a love that had been quenched long years before by a fierce flood of passions.

Walking in silence, with averted face, he cut at the flowers and shrubs with a stick which he carried in his hand.

The girl glanced up at him anxiously several times. She could not see the expression of his face.

Presently she broke the silence.

"Walt."

He made no answer, but turned his face to the front, as if willing to listen to her, and so walked with his eyes on the ground.

After another pause, the girl again spoke, in low, hesitating tones.

"Walt, you have never told me about—Aunt Sue and—myself—as you promised."

She clasped her hands with a wringing motion and drew her shoulders forward, gazing up into his face panting and with great tears in her eyes, as little children are sometimes seen to do, when they have broached a forbidden subject in which strong desire centers.

"Oh! I have so longed to know!" she murmured, pleadingly, with her whole heart in her quivering tones.

The man started.

"Wait! wait!" he said, soothingly. "Not now. But I will tell you, all in good time. There! there! do not cry!"

But with her hands pressed hard over her eyes, the girl sobbed violently, and stood trembling in every nerve.

Then Patent-leather Joe sat down on a bowlder, and drawing the sorrowing girl to his side, and placing her head on his shoulder, began to stroke her luxuriant hair; and so soothed her until she rested quietly, gazing up at the moon and tranquilly sailing clouds, her breast shaken by only an occasional spasmodic sob.

Her sunny temperament would not long be overcast by grief, and soon he won her to smiles. Then he approached the subject which he had been meditating ever since he had awakened that night to the fact of her womanhood.

"Berry," he said, "do you love me very much?"

"Yes," she replied, innocently, "you have always been good to me and Aunt Sue."

A slight frown flitted across his brow.

She was so much a child that it was difficult to make her understand, without an avowal which he feared would shock her.

Again he drew her close in his arms and kissed her lips.

Again the resistance she offered was very slight, and sprung from a vaguely startled feeling rather than from any clearly-defined repugnance.

"Berry, I am going away from you for a time," he said, watching her narrowly.

"Going away? When? Where? Why are you going, and for how long?"

Her questions were eager. The anxiety in her eyes was open, with no trace of coyness.

Instead of answering her directly, he asked:—

"Shall you miss me?"

"Why, yes, of course; we shall both miss you so very much. But it seems so strange. Why are you going?"

"Business will call me away."

"Not for long?"

"A few weeks, perhaps."

"Can't you take us along with you? It will be so lonesome here, with only Aunt Sue and Nero. I shall almost be afraid."

"Berry," he asked, trying to control his voice, "would you like to be with me always?"

"Yes," she said, wondering somewhat at his manner. "I always shall be, shan't I?"

"I have been thinking of it a great deal of late," he replied.

Abruptly he added:

"Berry, do you know that you are a woman, now?"

"Am I?" asked the girl, with a show of surprise, as if it were a new thought to her.

"Yes; and it's pretty near time you were married. Don't you think so?"

At that the girl laughed, an amused, care-free laugh. Then she blushed and drew her shoulders together, with her head on one side and a rosy half-smile on her lips, which showed that in her solitary rambles she had begun to

build air castles with the handsome Prince whom nothing could daunt.

"Oh, no," she said, "that's ever so far away yet."

"Berry," he said, softly, "I have hoped that it was not. Do you know, dear, that all these years I have watched you growing more and more beautiful day by day, until—"

He drew her down until his lips were at her ear.

"Until—oh, Berry, is it strange that I should learn to love you and want you for my wife?"

CHAPTER IV.

A BETROTHAL—FALLEN FROM THE CLIFF—A NEW LOVE—"OH! MY HUSBAND!"

"Your wife!" the girl cried, breathlessly, with a spasmodic effort to start from his embrace.

But he held her fast.

Then up went her hands, and, the tide of maiden shame streaming all over face and neck, she murmured:

"Oh! let me go, please!"

"Berry! Berry!" he breathed, plaintively, "all my life happiness depends upon you. Do you wish to make me miserable, after all that I have hoped and so longed for?"

"No-o-o," she whispered.

"And, dear, don't you love me enough to make me happy every day of my life, by being my wife?"

Trembling violently, the girl was mute.

"Don't you, Berry?" he persisted.

"Ye-e-s, if you wish it," was the hesitating reply.

"My darling!" he cried, clasping her ecstatically to his heart. "Now I shall have you with me always!—always!"

"But—but—can't I live with you—just the same—without—without being—your—wife?"

"Oh, no, dear. You'd slip through my fingers—going off with somebody else, you know."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't," said the girl, eagerly.

Patent-leather Joe laughed, though he was not altogether undisturbed by her evident willingness to resort to any expedient other than the one he wished.

"Well, dear, we won't discuss it," he said, "since you have consented to be my wife."

"Perhaps—I won't suit—you," she faltered.

"Oh, yes, you will," he replied. "And when we are married I will tell you all about yourself."

"Will you?" cried the girl, with sudden animation.

"Certainly, dear. And now, will you seal our bargain with a kiss?"

Smiling he drew her toward him.

Held by the magnetic power of his eye, so that she could not look away from him, and with her heart fluttering like a bird yielding to the fascinations of a serpent, the girl felt herself helplessly drawn nearer and nearer, until her lips touched his.

"Mine!—all mine!" cried Patent-leather Joe, kissing her again and again with such passionate vehemence that, when at last he released her, she was faint and dizzy, and trembling with a vague fear of she knew not what.

"Here is our betrothal ring, dear," he proceeded, taking from his pocket a plain gold circlet, evidently old and much worn. "But I do not wish you to wear it on your finger yet. See, I have put it on this silken cord, so that you can wear it out of sight about your neck."

And with his own hand he slipped the cord over her head and dropped the token into the throat of her dress.

As the girl felt the ring glide into her bosom, she shrank away from it with a little involuntary shiver; but offered no further resistance.

"Say nothing to Aunt Sue of what has passed between us; and do not let her see the ring," continued the gambler. "And now I must leave you. It will seem an age to me. Good-by, dear. Remember!—my happiness is now in your keeping."

He bent and kissed her, and then strode away.

She stood looking after him like one in a dream.

She was startled by the touch of something cold and moist in her palm.

It was only the nose of her faithful bloodhound, who thus sought to rouse her from her long reverie.

Taking hold of his collar, as if somehow she needed his protection, she turned with a sigh and walked back to the face of the cliff, where, lifting the curtain of vines she disappeared from view.

The space which she entered behind the curtain proved to be a cave of some extent, adopted as a place of abode.

It was divided into compartments by curtains strung on wires; and coarse matting covered the smooth sand floor. Light was obtained from ordinary dip candles, made from the fat of wild animals.

Though the furniture was by no means pretentious, it was all that was necessary for comfort.

In an inner apartment, which evidently served as a kitchen, a woman sat crouching over a small fire, crooning monotonously in a low tone, as if lulling a baby to sleep. Her straggling gray hair and her emaciated figure, wasted almost to a skeleton, made her look much older than she really was.

Wrapped in an old faded shawl, with one corner thrown over her head, as a sort of hood, she was in appearance not far from the typical hag.

Going up to her, Berenice rested her hand on her shoulder, and said:

"Aunt Sue, are you feeling better?"

The woman paid no heed, but kept on rocking her bent form to and fro, and mumbling her strange melody.

The girl bent down and kissed her gently, and putting her arm about her and lifting her up, said:

"Come, Aunt Sue; it is bed-time."

The old woman submitted in silence, and allowed herself to be led away, disrobed and put to bed.

Then the girl went to her own curtained apartment and threw herself on her couch.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes unusually lustrous. For hours she tossed about in feverish restlessness. At last, toward morning, she sunk into a troubled sleep, in which she frequently started, or sobbed, or gave vent to a gasping sigh.

With the first chirrup of the birds she was up and out, to greet awakening Nature, the friend she loved so well.

Out of harmony with the universal cheerfulness of the early morning and the bright familiar light of the sun, the phantoms of the night fled away, and the girl went about her accustomed tasks, singing almost as lightly as ever. She was neither glad nor sorry for the change that had come into her life. It only seemed all so strange. What she thought of most was, that when she was his wife, Patent-leather Joe would tell her all about herself.

So she passed the day in a state of suppressed excitement, until toward night, while she was wandering amid the cliffs with her constant companion, Nero, she heard a low groan, and the dog showed signs of restiveness, and uttered a low, whining bay.

A moment later she had gained the side of a man who had evidently fallen from the rocks above.

The first emotion of her gentle nature was keen pity. It was instantly blended with a sense of strong admiration.

At a glance she noted his strong, symmetrical frame and his frank, kindly countenance.

The hero of her dreams lay before her, appealing directly to that pity which the poet has said is "akin to love!"

Her heart beat wildly. She forgot all about Patent-leather Joe—about Aunt Sue—about herself—about everything but the injured man.

"Oh, sir! you are hurt! What can I do? How can I help you?" she cried, tears springing to her eyes in her excess of sympathetic pain.

And kneeling beside him, slipped her arm under his neck and raised his head.

Arthur Hamilton—for it was he—looked up at this angel of loveliness who had come to succor him; and in spite of the pain that blanched his cheeks and lips a radiant smile of wondering admiration overspread his face.

He felt her warm arm against his neck, and his ear was so near that he could hear the throbbing of her heart, while her fluttering breath and her tearful eyes told of her sweet pity!

All this he drank into his soul, and throughout his frame darted delicious thrills of ecstasy.

"Who are you?" he asked, scarcely above a whisper, with a sort of reverential awe.

"I am Berenice," replied the girl, innocently.

"Ber-e-ni-ce!" repeated Arthur, dwelling on the syllables of the name with a sort of brooding tenderness, while his eyes clung to hers in a worshipful gaze that might have disconcerted her, had not her sympathy for his pain been so all-engrossing.

"Yes! yes!" she replied, hurriedly. "But tell me how I can help you. I don't know how to begin."

He would have preferred that she should keep on holding him, just as she was doing; but as that could not continue, he said:—

"Don't distress yourself on my account. If you could turn me over just a little bit and get my leg from under me, perhaps I'd lie easier. There! So! Ah-h!"

She turned him as he directed, and straightened out his leg; and the result was that he nearly fainted with excruciating pain, though her touch was the very gentlest.

"Oh! I have hurt you!" she cried.

"Not the least in the world!" he gasped, musing the truth heroically.

Had it killed him, he would have sworn that it was the most delightful sensation of his life! "Can you lie so until I go for help?" she asked.

"I guess I'm not so badly broke up but, if you'll put that tuft of grass under my head, I'll do," he replied, smiling, though his lips were colorless.

The rascal knew that in order to get the imprudent pillow in place she would have to lift his head again with her arm under his neck.

And with the sweetest unconsciousness she fell into his amatory little trap!

Next she made the dog put his nose in Arthur's hand, and patting him on the head, said: "Watch him, Nero! Good dog—good dog!"

And while the intelligent animal lay with his nose between his paws, she sped away, as fleet as any fawn, for Aunt Sue.

"Oh, dear Auntie!" she cried, throwing her arms about the poor, demented creature, the new-born love which had so suddenly sprung up in her heart unconsciously overflowing in tenderness toward this other object of her affection—"dear Auntie, you must arouse yourself. There is a gentleman in the glen who has fallen from the rocks. You must help me to bring him into the house."

"A man in the glen—a stranger!" exclaimed Aunt Sue, apprehensively.

"He cannot hurt us, dear. He is greatly injured. And then he would not. I know he is good."

The old woman rose in sudden trepidation. "Get stimulants and bandages!" she directed. Berenice hastened to comply.

When they came in sight of the wounded man, Aunt Sue uttered a sharp cry and cast herself upon him, exclaiming:

"Oh! my husband! My darling husband!"

CHAPTER V.

YOUNG LOVE'S DREAM.

You may well believe that Berenice stood aghast at Aunt Sue's unexpected exclamation. That Arthur's surprise should be quite as great is not strange.

The hound rose and bayed dismally.

"Oh! my murdered loved one!" moaned Aunt Sue, "will you forgive me—will you believe me? I have been true to you! Indeed—indeed, I have never wronged you by so much as a thought! Oh, Fred! speak to me—only one word—only one word! See! my husband, for our child's sake—our little baby boy! You love him so! Can you leave him? Frederick! Frederick! A word—only a word! Oh! God of mercy! it's too late—he's dead—he's dead!"

Her voice in its wild appeal rose to a scream, and then died away in its despair to a heart-broken wail.

Weeping distractedly, she arose and fled back to the cave, wringing her hands and beating her head and breast.

"Go to the poor creature at once," said Arthur, comprehending the situation. "I can wait."

"Here! take this," said Berenice, thrusting a flask of spirits into his hand, and hastened after her insane relative.

She returned in a few minutes.

"I can do nothing for her," she said. "Now, how can I get you into the house without her help?"

"Your stimulant has already done me a great deal of good," said Arthur. "I think I was weak from the loss of blood. Now, if no bones are broken, perhaps I can manage with your help."

"Help me to a sitting posture first, please. There! Ah! So! Um! It grinds some; but if you will baby me a little, I shall get along famously."

"That knee is all right. Ah! It isn't so limber as it was this time yesterday."

"Oh!—ah! I guess there's a joint—in that—ah!—rib that wasn't—down in the or—oh!—in the original design. We won't meddle with that—until we get into the house."

"Um! There's where all the blood comes from. Sharp rocks are tougher than flesh, ain't they?"

"Oh! let me get you some water to wash that ugly wound; and then I will bind it up."

"No, thank you. Nature has patched it up for the present better than we can fix it. Does the sight of blood make you nervous?"

"I can't help thinking how it must pain you."

"Not a bit—Ah-h-h! Um! That was a little twinge, I'll confess! I'm afraid that leg's a total wreck! It's been playing quartz-crusher, and got the worst of it."

"My head, too, must have been trying conclusions with some of the primitive. It feels like a cracked coconut."

"Oh! how sorry I am for you!" sighed the girl.

"Thank you; but it isn't worthy of your notice. Now, if you can get me a stick of some sort, to use as a crutch or cane."

She had one for him in a moment.

"Now, if I can edge up to that sapling. Will you put your arm about me? So! The-e-re! I guess we'll—ah!—we'll manage it—one moment!—so!—by slo-o-ow—ah!—stages. Ah! Here we are! It has winded me, hasn't it? I'll breathe a bit, if you please."

The sweat stood on his brow and he fainted with exhaustion!

"If I were only stronger," sighed the girl, "I could carry you."

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed—a rather faint laugh, but a brave effort—"how you'd look carrying a great lubberly fellow like me! Yesterday I wouldn't have asked any better fun than to carry you; but I'd have to let out the job to-day, wouldn't I?"

"Now that I am rested, if you will give me the support of your arm once more. Thank you. I'm afraid I tax your strength too much."

"Oh, no! Indeed, I am stronger than you think."

She lifted his arm and put it about her neck, and wound her arm about his body. It delighted him, in spite of his pain.

He grasped the sapling with his other hand, got his best leg under him, and set his teeth for the painful effort.

Slowly he rose to his feet; and when at last he stood erect, an involuntary moan escaped his lips, and his head sunk forward until his cheek rested on her sunny hair.

Standing thus within the circle of his arm, and feeling his strong frame tremble, the girl suffered as much in sympathetic imagining as he did in reality.

She felt no shrinking from him, nor a particle of fear. It seemed to her as if she had known him all her life.

When he saw the distance he must walk even his stout heart failed him.

"That is almost as distant as heaven," he said. Then glancing in her face with a faint smile, he added: "Distance isn't the only point of resemblance, since it is your home!"

Perhaps it was the first real compliment to which the girl had ever listened. She flushed brightly with pleasure.

"I have an idea!" she said, trying to cover her confusion with sudden animation. "Why can't you ride on Nero's back? He is strong enough to bear you."

"That's an idea, indeed, if Nero does not object. Suppose we consult his dogship's pleasure."

"He'll do anything I want him to. Come here, sir! Stand there! Now, let me ease you down."

The animal, was perfectly docile; and with much less pain than he could have walked, Arthur actually rode to the cave, steadied by Berenice's arm.

When at last he was safely bestowed on Berenice's own bed—she put him there because it was softer than the one Patent-leather Joe used when he was at home—he almost swooned with exhaustion.

Then began a new experience in the lives of both these young beings so well suited to each other.

She had him helplessly under her care, so that she could lay down her whole life at his feet. Every thought, every energy of her being was devoted to his service.

She never analyzed her feelings. It did not occur to her that there was possible disloyalty to her pledge to Patent-leather Joe. She was so wholly engrossed with Arthur, that it required little if any effort to avoid all thought of Joe, either one way or the other. Only when his ring forced itself upon her notice, she experienced a sensation for which she would have found it difficult to account.

As for Arthur, every want was ministered by her hand, every good he owed to her watchful care, and it was all infinitely, deliciously sweet.

To him her every movement was poetry, her

voice music, the touch of her hand a panacea for all pain.

As yet, his love was too ethereal for the familiarity of a caress, so that he never startled her into a knowledge of the nature of the ties that were interweaving their lives more and more closely every hour.

So passed the time until he was convalescent and could walk with her, in the warm sunshine and under the mellow light of the moon.

He had told her about Flash Lightning, and asked her to fetch him.

She replied that she could not leave their place of abode, nor admit strangers, without Walter's consent. For years Aunt Sue and she had led perfectly secluded lives, rarely seeing any one belonging to the outside world, and then always in Walter's company. Arthur was the only stranger who had penetrated to their secret retreat.

All this seemed strange to Arthur; but as he could see no connection between the man she called Walter and the gambler he had met as Patent-leather Joe, and as he feared no rival in one who had been her guardian ever since her infancy, he did not try to break through the reserve with which she spoke of Walter.

Thus he necessarily put off communicating with Flash Lightning until he could go to him in person.

With returning strength came the desire to seek again the great outside world of action, which brought the thought of having to part with Berenice or take her with him as his wife.

It flashed upon him suddenly one day, and without a second thought he turned and caught both the girl's hands.

Berenice looked up at him, a little startled by his abruptness, yet with a smile of pleased expectancy.

She saw something altogether new in the fixed, eager regard with which he read her eyes. It was vastly different from what she had seen in Patent-leather Joe's face, and yet enough like it so that she knew its meaning at the time.

Her first sensation was a thrill of exultant delight; the rich color mantled cheek and brow; and unconsciously she gave a responsive pressure to the clasp of Arthur's hands.

Then, like a stab with a knife, came a scorching sting from the ring that rested, forgotten in her bosom, and she turned as pale as a lily.

By this time Arthur had caught her in his arms, and his passionate words were ringing in her ears.

"Sweet! I needn't tell you, and you needn't tell me, in words; for we both know it already—don't we, Berenice?"

And without waiting for her answer, he pressed his first kiss on her lips. He was no faint-hearted wooer. He saw that she belonged to him, and he never thought of beating about the bush.

In that first moment, when the revelation of her love brought with it the knowledge of the iron manacles that bound her to another, she was equally powerless to repulse him, or to respond to his caresses.

Before the impassioned lover discovered that she lay cold and inert in his embrace, both were brought face to face with the barrier that rose between them in the person of Patent-leather Joe, who stepped from the undergrowth and stood in their presence with folded arms.

"So!" he exclaimed, in a low, hoarse, rattling hiss.

His brows were indented until they met. His eyes were closely contracted, and glittered like those of a basilisk. A white circle that had settled about his mouth could be seen on the nether lip, the upper being hidden by his mustache. His nostrils were pinched, with a white spot on either side.

He stood the impersonation of deadly hatred!

CHAPTER VI.

A MURDEROUS INTRUDER—A FEARFUL RIDE.

STARTLED by the intrusion of this evil monster on his love-dream, Arthur stared at the gambler in speechless astonishment.

Being a woman, Berenice's first thought was to establish peace between the man who owned her heart and the man who claimed her allegiance.

Tearing herself from Arthur's embrace, she sprung toward his rival, with a sharp cry of deprecation:

"Walt!"

Without looking at her, Patent-leather Joe brushed her aside.

He glared fixedly at the man in whose arms

he had seen his betrothed wife—the woman whom he had brought up under his own eye from her very infancy, until she should be ripe for his enjoyment.

Berenice's one word informed Arthur that he was confronted by her guardian.

He inferred from that that she was in no danger, though toward himself he read murder, as plainly as if it had been written in letters of blood.

He never dreamed of Patent-leather Joe in the light of a possible rival. He thought that his anger sprung from finding an intruder in the home he had kept so secluded, augmented by the fact that that intruder was one toward whom he had previous cause for hostility. Then too he would naturally be suspicious of a stranger's intentions toward Berenice, whom he had reared with such evident care.

To Arthur's mind this amply accounted for Patent-leather Joe's anger. Had it not been so extreme, he would have tried to propitiate him; but he saw that the gambler was deaf to reason, and would kill him before he had a chance to vindicate himself.

In that secluded valley, where even defenseless women were safe, Arthur, having been reared in the East, had not thought it necessary to carry weapons; so he had now only his hands to defend himself with, while Patent-leather Joe was armed with the accustomed bowie and revolvers.

Fortunately they were not far from the mouth of the cave; and keeping his eyes fixed on those of his enemy, as he would have watched a wild beast, Arthur began to retreat backward toward where his weapons were.

Patent-leather Joe, knowing his purpose, and having no intention to let him accomplish it, yet willing to prolong the enjoyment of his devilish hatred, followed him with a creeping motion, step by step, neither increasing nor diminishing the distance between them.

Terrified into utter helplessness, Berenice walked not more than a pace behind the gambler, and a little to one side, powerless to touch him or even to speak to him again. Had he drawn a weapon it might have broken the charm, so that she could spring upon him and try to prevent the murder by embarrassing his movements; but while he crept forward thus, like the demon of hate that he was, she was spell-bound.

At this moment the hound, Nero, issued from the mouth of the cave, and bounded toward his master with demonstrations of affectionate greeting.

At sight of him a devilish idea lighted Patent-leather Joe's face with a smile that the arch-fiend might have envied.

"Hah! I'll have him torn to pieces before my eyes!" he muttered.

And crouching low, and glaring at Arthur with a savage grin, he clapped his hands and cried:

"Take him, Nero! H's—s! Tear him limb from limb!"

With a bay, not of anger but of friendship, the dog bounded toward Arthur and put his nose in his hand, as if to show that he was a friend.

"Good dog—good Nero!" said Arthur, patting him on the head.

The animal bounded back to his master, evidently thinking that it was all right.

Berenice's heart, which for an instant had stood still, now went out to the dog in a great throb of love, and she murmured:

"Dear Nero!"

As for Patent-Leather Joe, he nearly choked with rage.

"And he has won you too?" he cried.

And turning, as the dog passed him to go to Berenice, he drew his revolver and shot the noble beast through the head.

Without a whine, Nero fell to the ground, quivered convulsively, and straightened himself in death.

"Oh Walt! What have you done?" cried Berenice, astonishment and dismay taking the place of every other emotion.

And forgetful of all else, she knelt beside her dead companion.

Knowing that his turn would come next, Arthur took advantage of the momentary diversion of the gambler's eye from him, and turning, ran toward the mouth of the cave.

With a savage oath, Patent-leather Joe whirled around again, and fired at the rapidly-retreating figure of his rival, and then started in hot pursuit.

But Arthur gained the curtain of vines, and disappeared from view.

Patent-leather Joe followed, almost at his heels.

Berenice was left alone, frozen with terror. She heard two more pistol-shots.

They were followed by sounds of a struggle. Clear and shrill above Patent-leather Joe's hoarse curses rose Aunt Sue's voice. The poor, insane creature was wrought to the highest pitch of excitement.

What could Berenice do? She felt that Arthur (yet weak from illness, while Walt was in the full vigor of health) was being murdered, and that she was powerless to help him.

At that instant she heard the whinny of a horse that Patent-leather Joe had ridden into the valley.

Instantly she conceived the idea of going for Flash Lightning, to come to the rescue of his friend.

She did not reflect that, for good or ill, the struggle would be over long before she could even reach her lover's "pardner." She had but the one thought, to get him.

She knew from Arthur's description pretty nearly where he was to be found—that is to say, if she were fortunate enough to find him at home.

Quickly she gained the side of the horse, mounted his back in spite of the inconvenient saddle, and urged him with voice and rein to his greatest speed.

Out of the valley, and then up among the cliffs she sped, risking her life at every step, placing all dependence on the sure-footed beast that bore her so gallantly.

Now scrambling up some steep incline, now slipping and sliding down some weather-worn declivity, now tearing through the under-brush, now coursing along a less-obstructed bridle-path,—on! ever on, she sped, wide-eyed with a terrible dread, panting with nervous sobs, with her long hair streaming in the wind and adding to her wild look.

Foam flew in white flecks from her horse's lips, dappling his reeking breast and flanks. His legs were torn and bleeding, rent by thorns and cut by the jagged edges of rocks. His nostrils were distended and his eyes round and wild with the exertions he was making.

On! on! unconscious that her hands and face were lacerated and her dress torn, and every muscle so strained that she could scarcely cling to her saddle!

The noble girl had but one thought, that connected her imperiled lover and the fiend who alone could save him.

Then occurred a terrible accident!

She heard a fierce buzzing sound. Next her horse uttered a screaming neigh, vaulted high in the air, and kicked wildly, nearly unseating her; then coursed madly away, kicking and biting, no longer picking his way, but frantically endeavoring to rid himself of the swarm of hornets that had attacked him at every point.

In that place of pitfalls and perils without name, the girl knew that the animal she rode was now wholly beyond her control. Worse, he was so occupied with the torments that gave him no rest that he could exercise no caution whatever.

She, too, felt their terrible stings, as they hung in a cloud about her, striking now here, now there, until she felt as if on fire.

She could make no effort even to protect her face. In that mad ride, where to relax her hold but an instant meant certain death, she could but cling desperately to her horse's back, and await the uncertain issue.

More and more precipitous became the way, until she was riding along a narrow ledge, with a wall of rock on one side, and a sheer descent of a hundred feet on the other.

With a great heart-thrill of terror she recognized the place, and knew that a little further on was an angle round which it required a sure-footed horse to pass at a walk. At the mad pace she was going, she must inevitably be hurled over the precipice, to die a mangled corpse on the rocks below!

Wildly she clutched at the bridle-rein.

She nearly lost her seat, and her horse swerved so near the edge of the cliff that for one terrible moment she thought that all was over.

Half-blinded by the sting of a hornet, and nearly swooning with terror, she dimly saw some obstruction in the path—heard a warning cry, followed by a pistol-shot—felt her horse leap high, with a neigh of pain and terror, and threw herself from his back.

There was a rush through empty space—then oblivion!

CHAPTER VII.

A LEAP FOR LIFE!—A NEW PERIL!

ON the night of their suddenly-formed friendship, Flash Lightning and Arthur Hamilton

parted company, with the understanding that they would meet again on the morrow, when the proposed partnership was to go into operation, and henceforth their prospecting and mining schemes be prosecuted in company.

But feeling restless early in the morning, Arthur had gone out "to look around a bit," with results which we have already learned.

When Flash Lightning came to look for his "pardner" he was not to be found; and by the next day his prolonged absence excited serious anxiety.

Patent-leather Joe too had disappeared; and Flash Lightning began to fear that the coincidence pointed to foul play.

True to his friendship, the youth resolved to search for Arthur's body, if indeed he had fallen a victim to the gambler's resentment.

For days he devoted himself to the self-appointed task, searching every nook and cranny within miles of Virginia City.

He was almost in despair, when one day he heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs along a ledge which he was traversing.

A moment later, horse and rider burst into view, and he saw a young girl, with hair streaming in the wind, clinging to the back of an animal whose headlong course jeopardized her life at every bound.

Instantly he realized the inevitable destruction to which she was rushing. Standing against the face of the wall, he cried:

"Jump! I will catch you!"

As the horse neared him, threatening to ride him down, he fired at his breast, then threw up his arms with a wild yell.

The animal leaped high, as the bullet penetrated his body, swerved outward, struck the verge of the precipice, and toppling over, went hurtling down to the rocks below, to lie a quivering, gory mass of mangled flesh.

But the rider had thrown herself from the saddle!

True to his promise, Flash Lightning caught her in his arms; but the impetus of her body hurled him from his feet; and, having saved her from death or mutilation, he lay stunned and bleeding on the very brink of the cliff, over which he came near rolling with his burden.

For a time Berenice too lay unconscious; but her fall had been broken, and her swoon was one of over-excitement, rather than from the shock.

When she recovered, she found herself lying across the body of the man who had saved her life, and so near to the precipice that her arm hung over the verge.

In terror she started back, and then sought to drag her preserver to a more secure distance; but her exhausted energies were unequal to the task.

She next sought to restore him to consciousness, but failed. He lay like a dead man. She feared that his skull had been fractured.

She felt that she must go for assistance.

But if he recovered while she was gone, in the first gropings of returning animation he might roll over the cliff!

To obviate this danger, she removed from her waist a silken scarf which Arthur Hamilton had worn, and with which he had playfully adorned her that morning; and securing one end of the scarf to a boulder, she tied the other end about Flash Lightning's wrist. Being thus anchored he could get no nearer the precipice.

Then to her tremulous limbs she set the task of bearing her whither she knew not—anywhere in search of a fellow-creature who could be moved to pity.

For perhaps half an hour she toiled amid the rocks, with leaden feet and swimming head. Then, while dark spots floated before her eyes, and her ears rung with a dull, humming sound, she saw directly in her path a large rattlesnake, coiled, ready to spring at her.

She saw the vibrant tail, the head rising from the coil and drawn ominously back, the glittering eyes, the forked, restless tongue and the white fangs. All the horrors of a death by the poison of that deadly reptile came over her with a creeping, sickening sense of loathing.

She would have leaped back, but her feet seemed glued to the rock. She would have cried out, but her tongue lay like a lump of lead in her mouth.

Everything faded from view but those glittering eyes and the vibrant tongue. She felt as if she were floating in space. All about her seemed suddenly pervaded by a strange, weird music.

Then all died out with nothingness.

She sunk down, once more unconscious!

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD RATTLESNAKE—THE SNAKE-CHARMER'S HOME—A LOATHSOME SPECTACLE—BERENICE'S FLIGHT.

BERENICE's sensations were not all illusive. The music was a reality.

It proceeded from a sort of hautboy, in the hands of a strange-looking old man, whom Berenice had approached without seeing.

Judging from his sallow, wrinkled skin, and neglected gray beard and hair, he might have been pronounced sixty or seventy years old; but in fact he was not over fifty.

His dress and accouterments were rather odd for the country in which he lived.

He wore an old Oxford collegian's cap, with its square top and tassel. His coat was almost a gown in length and looseness, and was full of large pockets, which now contained plants, or bits of rock, or birds which he had shot with a double-barreled shot-gun slung to his back by a strap. One of these pockets held a variety of birds' eggs, protected by a feathery moss. In another was perhaps a score of little snakes, harmless by reason of their infancy. To a belt about his waist, under his long coat, were strung three or four large rattlesnakes, which coiled about his legs or hung pendent at pleasure.

At the moment when we introduce him to the reader, he was playing a weird melody on a much-worn reed instrument, with his eyes fixed on the reptile that threatened Berenice's life.

The snake yielded to the charm of the music. The coil relaxed some of its tension. The head rose higher and began to oscillate in time with the rhythm of the strange melody.

Presently the serpent uncoiled his body and glided up to the musician.

Without stopping the melody, the snake-charmer put out his hand and ran it along the body of the repulsive reptile.

The snake showed no signs of repulsion, but lay still, like a domestic animal receiving a caress.

The music, which had swelled wildly at times, now became low and exquisitely pathetic, while the man's hand closed about the neck of the snake with a firm, steady pressure.

The reptile seemed to sink into an ecstatic trance.

Presently the music became a single prolonged note, very low and sweet.

The charmer watched the reptile narrowly.

The snake moved restlessly.

The melody began again, more exquisitely pathetic, if possible, than before.

The hideous monster once more yielded to its charm.

At a second trial the snake showed no signs of arousing. Then, having both hands free, while the instrument was held between his lips, Old Rattlesnake (for that was the name this strange old man had received) drew forth a knife or lancet, with a spoon-shaped blade, but very small.

By a skillful pressure of the finger and thumb of the left hand the snake's mouth was opened. Then by a quick movement of the lancet the reptile was rendered harmless by the removal of its venom-sac.

Instantly the snake-charmer dropped his lancet and began a succession of wild cadences on his hautboy, while the reptile writhed about his wrist and forearm, he holding it by the neck, so that it was powerless to bite him.

After a time it once more succumbed to the spell of his music. Then Old Rattlesnake examined its mouth critically, and the poison sac as well; and having satisfied himself that his work was effectually done, strung it to his belt with the others.

The old snake-charmer now advanced and bent over the unconscious Berenice.

The first glance into her pale face caused him to start violently.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, with a sort of gasp. Then, kneeling and lifting her limp hand—"So fair!—so delicate! Agatha! Agatha! in her thou seemest to live again! If she were but thy child—Ah! what am I saying?"

A sad humor gathered in his eyes as he gazed at the girl. Then he murmured:

"For thy sake I will care for her more tenderly than but for the resemblance. Is it altogether fancied?"

And lifting the limp form in his arms, he began to pick his way among the rocks toward his sequestered abode.

Ever and anon he paused, to lift the head with its wealth of sun-lit hair from his shoulder, and gaze into the still, white face. As often he murmured:

"So like, sweet Agatha!—dead Agatha! Ah!" And with the sigh, he would shake his head sadly and walk on.

Presently he reached a low-roofed hut, rudely built, and yet a shelter from the storm. It was all overgrown with creepers, and but a step from its doorway was a garden-patch, with hotbeds, filled with what seemed to be specimens of flora of that part of the country.

Not far distant was an artificial basin in which fish of various kinds sported; and built partly within and partly without the house a wire aviary held its tribe of fluttering, twittering birds.

From these surroundings we may infer that Old Rattlesnake was a naturalist, though his unusual familiarity with the most venomous of reptiles had most impressed his rude neighbors, and had thus given him his *sobriquet*.

Bearing Berenice into the hut, which everywhere bore tokens of his life-passion, he laid her on a bed in the innermost of its two apartments, and stood gazing at her buried in melancholy thought.

For a long time he stood thus; and when at last he suddenly awakened to the expediency of applying restoratives, he discovered that her swoon had lapsed into an exhausted slumber.

With a parent's solicitude he examined the inflamed spots on face, neck and hands, which marked the stings of the hornets, and applied a cooling lotion to them. Then he left her and repaired to the other room, closing the door gently.

He was much distressed in mind, evidently a prey to painful recollections, and often the name of Agatha escaped his lips uttered in the tenderest accents.

After an interval of perhaps two hours, Berenice awakened from her slumber.

With a sense of strangeness upon her, she lay perfectly still, to collect her thoughts and look about before attempting to move.

She was in an unfamiliar room, evidently having a man for its usual tenant, as was evidenced by a Mexican saddle, a pair of top-boots and some mining implements on the floor, and several garments hanging against the wall.

So much for the sense of sight.

Listening, she heard the strangest music that had ever greeted her ears. Its sad, sweet cadences induced a dreamy melancholy, which disinclined her to move or do anything but listen.

But she thought that this must be the owner of the room; and then, wondering how she came to be his guest, the scene on the cliff of the man rescuing her from her runaway horse gradually recurred to her, and then the cause of her ride—*Arthur's deadly peril!*

And here she lay dreaming while Arthur might be dead!

With a great heart-throb of remorse and dread she instantly rose from the bed, though every muscle of her body seemed stiff and sore.

Was it Flash Lightning who had rescued her out there among the cliffs? If so doubtless he was just on the other side of the door. And yet, not certain who it might be, she went on tip-toe to reconnoiter before making herself heard.

Peeping through a crack in the door, she witnessed a spectacle that froze her blood!

Seated cross-legged in the middle of the floor, Old Rattlesnake was playing his strange music, while perhaps a half a score of loathsome reptiles lay their length at his feet, or coiled themselves about his person.

One, resting in his lap, had raised its head to a level with his face, and its sinuous body oscillated back and forth to the time of the music.

Near at hand were open boxes in which the reptiles evidently were kept.

The snake-charmer was so engrossed with his pets as to be oblivious to everything else. He watched them with a rapt look of admiration and affection that was horrible in its unnaturalness.

To the sensitive girl who had never witnessed or heard of such a thing, this old man was a monster even more loathsome, if possible, than his hideous play-things.

The thought occurred to her that he must have brought her to his house while she was unconscious—that she must have been held in his arms—that her face, perhaps even her mouth! had been in contact with his person!

A cold shudder passed over her from head to foot. She experienced a horrible creeping sensation all over her body as if the clammy folds of those nauseous monsters were in actual contact with her flesh!

In that moment of horror, when every nerve and every tissue sent forth its shuddering pro-

test of loathing—when all her nature shrunk back in utter detestation and abhorrence, she forgot even Arthur's peril in the one irresistible instinct of self-preservation.

No, that does not express it. Had it been merely death, she could have given up her life for Arthur's sake; but to have her flesh in actual contact with the most repulsive thing created, or to touch one whose nature was such that he could voluntarily handle, nay, *fondle!* anything so hideous—*Ugh!* she had but one thought—flight!

A window offered her the means of escape. Noiselessly she glided through, and was free!

But imagination pictured that man-monster, hung with wriggling serpents, in pursuit, and taking no note of whither she was going, she fled aimlessly.

This dread of being overtaken and dragged back to the snake-charmer's den, acted as an ever present spur, and her excessive fear made her waste the fictitious strength which that very fear lent her; so that when, after perhaps an hour's exhaustive flight, she heard a step behind her and a voice calling to her, she sank down utterly helpless.

The step came nearer, though sounding far away; she heard with muffled indistinctness the voice; she felt the touch of a hand on her shoulder; and without lifting her face from where it was buried in her hands, she fainted away with terror and weakness.

CHAPTER IX.

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER!

DURING Arthur Hamilton's stay in the cave under Berenice's care, Aunt Sue's mania had received a new impetus. The brooding melancholy which had clouded her life ever since Berenice's earliest recollections of her was succeeded by a quickening of all her faculties which made her a very different sort of person.

Laboring under the hallucination that Arthur was her husband, whose life had been attempted by a rival for her love, she gave him every attention—indeed, so much so as to interfere with that more exclusive enjoyment of Berenice's society which he would have preferred.

But as he became convalescent, the vividness of this impression seemed to abate somewhat, so that he was left freer to gratify his predilection for the younger woman.

So matters stood when Arthur rushed into the cave, hotly pursued by Patent-leather Joe.

Instantly Aunt Sue's hallucination sprang up again in all its intensity. She saw her husband fleeing for his life, pale with excitement, and with blood streaming over his face from a wound on the side of his head.

She saw Patent-leather Joe tear aside the curtain and fire again at his victim, just as Arthur seized his weapon and turned to defend himself.

Blindly Arthur fired a return shot, which flew wide of its mark, staggered a step forward, and sunk upon his knees.

With a mocking laugh, Patent-leather Joe raised his weapon for a finishing shot.

But at that instant Aunt Sue sprang upon him with a cry like that of a wounded tigress.

His bullet was flattened against the rocky walls of the cavern, and he felt his face being torn by the nails of the fury.

Bewildered by the fierceness and unexpectedness of this assault, he dropped his weapon in the effort to disembarass himself.

To overcome the maniac's artificial strength and activity was no slight task; and before he could hurl her from him, she had injured one of his eyes and lacerated his face, so that between the pain and the blood he was nearly blind.

He sought to draw the revolver remaining in his belt; but with the quickness of a cat she snatched it from its holster; and when he groped for the weapon that had fallen to the floor, her ready foot kicked it beyond his reach.

"You accursed devil's cat!" he snarled through his grating teeth, "why have I let you live so long!"

And drawing his bowie-knife with one hand, while he wiped the blood out of his eyes with the other, he advanced upon her with the grimace of a baffled fiend.

The woman, overcome by a sudden panic, cowered beside Arthur, and, staring at their assailant with eyes distended by insanity and terror, cried:

"Murderer of my husband!—abductor of my child!—have you not committed wickedness enough? Away!—away!—AWAY!"

And her voice rose to a shrill shriek of agonized fear.

By this time Arthur had recovered from the deadly faintness that had prostrated him.

Supporting himself on his knees by clinging to the bed, he leveled his revolver at his would-be murderer, and cried:

"Halt! I hold your life in my hand; but I have no desire to kill you unless you make it unavoidable."

"*Hah!—hah!—hah!*" panted the gambler, whom baffled rage had almost deprived of reason, so that for the time he was more a wild beast than a human being. "And do you dream that I will now yield to you? You give me my life—*ha—ah!* my life!—if I will tamely surrender!—if I will lick the dust at your feet and whine:—Take the hope of my life!—take the love of my life!—take the revenge of my life!—only leave me life itself—*hah!—sweet life—precious life!—hah!—ha—ah!*"

Wildly he dashed the blood from his eyes and cried:

"No! If you are to rob me of my soul's core, let my body rot, that I may not know my loss! War!—war to the death! You shall have all, or nothing!"

And raising his clenched hand with its murderous knife on high, he sprung forward to the attack.

At that instant Arthur Hamilton's revolver exploded.

With a look of anguish and horror Patent-leather Joe recoiled. The knife dropped from his nerveless hand. His arm sunk shattered and helpless at his side!

It was not so much the physical pain, as the overwhelming consciousness that his foe had refused to take his life, as he might have done, but instead had rendered him helpless, so that he must live on and know that Arthur had triumphed.

It never occurred to him that Berenice might adhere to her pledge. He thought that Arthur had already won her from her allegiance, and in imagination saw her clinging to her love and shrinking from him in abhorrence.

The thought goaded him to a frenzy of desperation.

"Not yet!—not yet!" he cried, and stooped to pick up the knife with his left hand.

But the maniac had seen the weapon fall; and darting forward, she snatched it up before he could reach it. At the same time she uttered a scream of exultation, as a vulture might in pouncing upon its prey.

With an oath of such concentrated rage that it seemed as if his heart might leap from his throat, Patent-leather Joe seized her by her long hair and hurled her violently to the floor of the cavern.

The knife flew out of her hand beyond recovery.

Patent-leather Joe had now nothing but his empty hands, and one of them helpless, while his foe held four lives in the chambers of his revolver; but the desperate gambler had no thought of abandoning the unequal struggle.

With an inarticulate cry which sounded like the snarl of a wild beast, he sprung upon Arthur, bearing him to the floor.

With a magnanimity and presence of mind which few men so circumstanced would have displayed, instead of seeking his assailant's life, the young man dropped his revolver, and seizing Patent-leather Joe's wounded arm, gave it a violent wrench.

With a scream of anguish the gambler fainted away; and the struggle was at an end.

CHAPTER X.

THE QUEST—PATENT-LEATHER JOE'S DELIVERANCE—TRACKED!—AT THE MERCY OF HIS FOE!

FOR some time after the termination of his desperate struggle with Patent-leather Joe, Arthur Hamilton lay exhausted, partly under the body of his now unconscious foe.

Aunt Sue lay at a little distance, stunned by her fall.

When he had gathered sufficient strength, Arthur rid himself of the burden of the gambler's body, and rising with some difficulty, tottered across the apartment, to where he could spur his flagging energies by a draught from a flask of spirits.

His next precaution was to bind Patent-leather Joe securely.

He then lay down on the bed, expecting that Berenice would soon venture into the cave, her fears allayed by the cessation of the sounds of strife.

Exhausted nature sought her proper medication, and without warning he sunk into slumber, from which he awoke perhaps an hour later much refreshed.

Patent-leather Joe lay like a baffled demon.

Aunt Sue, who had also recovered consciousness, sat in the middle of the floor, with the skirt of her dress thrown over her bowed head, rocking back and forth, and moaning in a low voice.

Arthur rose, feeling very weak and tremulous, and went out of the cave to search for Berenice.

All was still in the vale save for Nature's varied life. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

He called aloud:—

"Berenice!"

There was no response.

Still louder:—

"Berenice!"

Only the whirl of the startled thrush answered him.

Then he made search for her, thinking that she might be lying in a swoon.

His eye was rewarded no more than his ear.

If he had only Nero's true nose to guide him to her! But Nero lay still in death.

Coming upon the tracks of a horse evidently going at speed from the glen, he paused to speculate on their significance.

Had Berenice ridden the horse? and if so, whither had she gone?

Doubtless for help.

In that case whom would she ask?

She might go to Virginia City, or—

He started with a sudden idea. She might seek Flash Lightning!

So forcibly did this thought strike him that, without further reflection, he set out to follow the trail.

Patent-leather Joe and Aunt Sue were nothing to him, if only he got Berenice.

He never stopped to think whether it was wise or not to leave them in the cave together.

In coming out he had brought his own weapons; but he had not taken the precaution to remove those belonging to Patent-leather Joe.

The gambler heard Arthur calling Berenice's name, and knew by the diminishing loudness with which his voice could be heard that he was going further and further from the mouth of the cave.

The desperate man saw one more chance.

"Aunt Sue!" he said, in a decisive, yet not unkind tone.

The woman looked up very much in her ordinary manner.

"Get me a drink of water," he added in the same tone.

The woman got up and went to do his bidding, looking bewildered and somewhat apprehensive.

"Untie this knot for me," he said, when he had drunk the water.

The woman looked at him and began to tremble.

From him she looked about the apartment, as if vaguely contemplating flight.

It was a supreme moment!

If her shattered intellect picked up again, the thread for which it was evidently groping, he was lost!

If the habit of long years of passive submission prevailed, then he was a free man once more, ready to renew the struggle!

"Come! I am in a hurry!" he said, though his voice trembled, with the momentous issue.

"Forgive me," she said, deprecatingly, and knelt down and began to pick at his bonds.

One knot was removed. Then she paused and passed her hand across her brow.

"What has happened?" she asked. "I thought I saw—"

"Why are you so slow? Call Berry. Or, no—you shall do it yourself. Now be quick, Sue! I can't wait here all day!"

Patent-leather Joe's heart was in his mouth. His impatience was of a different sort from that simulated by his voice.

With a thrill of renewed hope, he saw Aunt Sue resume her work, with a sigh of hopelessness.

Her incautious handling of his wounded arm racked him with acutest agony; yet he made no sign. A cry of pain might furnish the missing clew to her clouded mind.

At last the trying ordeal was over—his hand was free!

Then he was master of the situation, and with no misgivings ordered her to make a sling for his shattered arm.

When she saw his arm bandaged she shrunk away from him with slow-coming consciousness.

He cared nothing for her now, but left her without a word or glance.

Fifteen minutes after Arthur Hamilton left the glade, the avenger was on his track!

Patent-leather Joe caught glimpses of his rival now and then among the crags, and followed on, intending to take him at a disadvantage. He must fire with his left hand, and could not afford to run any risks. He must creep upon him, and shoot him in the back at short range!

All unconscious of the peril in his rear, Arthur hastened on, giving his whole attention to trailing the animal he supposed to have been ridden by Berenice.

In health he had scrambled among the rocks with the untiring activity of a mountain goat. Now his pulses throbbed and his head swam, and his knees tottered under him.

Every once in a while he would stop to lean against a rock and regain his breath, and to dissipate the black spots that began to float before his vision. Then he would toil on, until he was nearly blind, and strange fancies began to mingle with realities.

He had proceeded perhaps half the distance to Flash Lightning's home, when he lost the trail.

For a time he was dimly conscious of searching to regain it. Then he lost the knowledge of where he was going, and why, and so wandered on and on aimlessly.

Patent-leather Joe saw this, and interpreted it aright. With a horrible grimace of malignant hate and triumph, he began to creep up on his intended victim.

He had diminished the distance to less than a hundred paces, and was watching his opportunity to close in upon him and end all, when Arthur caught sight of a figure with fluttering robes moving on before him.

To his eye, which had lovingly studied every detail of her dress and personal appearance, Berenice was immediately revealed, and his mind took cognizance of her even amid the vapors of fevered delirium.

He quickened his pace, and called:

"Berenice!"

Without looking back, the terrified girl sunk upon her knees and buried her face in her hands.

Arthur gained her side, bent over her, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

As if at his touch, she collapsed and sunk unconscious. As the reader knows, she was overpowered by fear of Old Rattlesnake.

Patent-leather Joe witnessed this reunion of his betrothed and his rival, and in his blind rage he ran against a projecting rock with his wounded arm. The pain was so intense that he sunk to the ground in utter helplessness, and had to fight hard not to lose consciousness in the awful nausea and vertigo that seized him.

A new thought tortured him.

There were two of them now. How could he creep upon them without being detected? He did not know that Berenice lay unconscious, and that Arthur was so absorbed in seeking to restore her, that he might have walked up to him with no precaution whatever, and knocked him on the head with a stick.

Presently he grew desperate and staggered to his feet, resolved to risk all on a single effort.

But he had wasted precious moments in despondent thought.

Arthur had dropped brandy between the lips of his beloved, and hung over her, chafing her hands and appealing to her with every endearing epithet his tongue could frame, until at last she opened her eyes and recognized him.

Then he took her in his arms; and she clung to him, forgetful of all else.

So Patent-leather Joe found them; and a suppressed howl of rage from his lips, and a stone loosened by his incautious foot, warned them of his approach.

With a scream the girl tore herself from her lover's arms.

"Oh! here is Walt again!" she cried. "Arthur! Arthur! let us fly!"

She seized him by the arm and sought to drag him away with her; but he stood still and gazed at Patent-leather Joe without a trace of recognition in his eye.

"Ah! a friend of yours?" he asked, smiling, and with a half-bow to Joe.

The girl's heart sunk in despair. She saw that he was wandering. He was utterly helpless, not rational enough to fear his deadly foe.

As for Patent-leather Joe, when he realized the situation he stopped and uttered a shriek of delight. Then he came up close to them, and stood regarding them with a sort of shivering laugh which was almost the gibe of a maniac, so intense was his gloating hatred and exultation.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MISSING GUEST—OLD RATTLESNAKE AND FLASH LIGHTNING—THE MEETING IN THE CAVE.

For some time after Berenice's flight Old Rattlesnake continued engrossed with his strange pets.

He had had recourse to them to wean his mind from the brooding memories which the sight of the girl had conjured up.

In a measure he was successful. When at last he put them away his brow had recovered its wonted serenity, dashed perhaps by a shade of tender melancholy.

With noiseless tread he went to the door and pushed it slightly ajar, to gaze in on his sleeping guest.

The room was empty!

The effect on the old naturalist was very marked. He stood like one dazed.

He pushed the door further open, took a step into the room, and gazed all around. There was no place to hide. She must indeed be gone.

He brushed his hand across his brow and gazed in the direction of the bed. There was the impress of her body. But for that he might have thought it all a conjuration of his imagination.

Slowly he crossed the room, sat down on the couch and put his hand in the depression, as if to satisfy himself that some one had indeed been there. The spot was yet warm.

With a sigh the snake-charmer bowed his face in his hands and sat thus in painful reverie.

"Agatha, was it thou?" he murmured. "Didst come to remind me of thy wrongs yet unavenged? Have I seemed to forget thee, Agatha? Yet have I loved and mourned thee—ay, unceasingly!"

"How can I make good that which the wickedness of man hath given to destruction? Will it better thy sore grievance should my hand visit upon thy destroyer—that which he meted out to thee? Hath not the great God, into whose presence thou art gone, said—'Vengeance is mine!—I will repay!' Hath He not set his seal of condemnation on the law—'An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth'?"

"See! Leaving the Great Avenger to the execution of His righteous law in his own good time and way, have not I done my part? Him, for the boon of whose keeping thou didst bless the bounteous God in thy day of happiness, and whose tender years thy death left unprotected—him have I reared with watchful solicitude—him have I loved much, that he might the less miss thy lost tenderness.

"Agatha! have I failed in my duty or my love for thee?—have not I done well?"

For a time he sat thus, and then rose, possessed by a feeling of restlessness.

Leaving the house, he took his way among the rocks, wringing his hands, and muttering to himself, and looking anxiously about.

He had not proceeded far when his attention was attracted by six pistol-shots, fired in rapid succession.

He stopped and listened.

The shots were repeated.

"'Tis some one in distress," he muttered, and hastened in the direction whence the sound came.

When he had proceeded a little way, he fired four shots from his own weapon.

He soon got an answering signal, which was repeated at intervals, until he was guided to the ledge where he found Flash Lightning crouching.

At sight of him the old man uttered a sharp cry of pain, and ran and knelt down beside him.

"Nay, my child!" he murmured, clasping the hand of the injured youth, "what misadventure hath laid thee helpless? Art wounded sore?—say it not!—oh, say it not!"

"Don't worry, Nunky," replied Flash Lightning, cheerily. "I'm stove in somewhere about the head-piece, and I've got a kink in my back that takes all the starch out of me when I try to set up; but barrin' that, I'm as good as new."

"Thou makest light of thy sufferings, which are not slight, I fear," said the old man, anxiously; "yet will not all thy bravery mend broken bones."

"Oh, I'm all right. But, uncle, here is work for me, that you must do in my stead. Do you see this scarf? It belongs to Arthur Hamilton, that I told you about. This morning I saved a girl from going over the cliff, by shooting her horse and catching her as she leaped from his back. It knocked me out of time, but she must have escaped uninjured: for when I recovered, I found myself anchored to a rock with this

scarf, so that I could not roll over the precipice. Uncle, she must have got it from Arthur, and no doubt he sent her for me. I know nothing about her except that she lives in the gulch due west from the great bend in Dead Man's Run. Arthur must be there, and you must go to him at once."

"Right willingly will I seek thy friend. But first let me place thee within the shelter of our home, and minister to thy pressing needs. Canst get upon my back?"

"No, no! Let me lay, and go at once to Arthur. He may need help worse than I do."

"Peace, boy! Let discretion run hand in hand with thy generosity. Whatever hath detained thy friend must have befallen him days ago; and now his need for thy company cannot be so urgent that thou shouldst not pause to medicine the ills of thine own body."

"Moreover, I have that of which I would speak to thee, as we go. See! I will lay me on my face—thus. Now, if thou canst get upon my back, I will rise under thy weight, and bear thee hence to the greater comfort of thine own bed."

Agreeably to his words the old snake-charmer stretched himself prone on the rock beside the injured youth.

With some effort and pain Flash Lightning got upon his back, and, with a strength of which his appearance gave no promise, the old man rose and bore him with seeming ease.

After walking a moment in silent thought, Old Rattlesnake began:

"Methinks I have seen the young woman that, as thou hast said, oweth her salvation to thy address and courage."

"Oh! And she sent you to me?"

"Not so. I found her confronted by a serpent, before which through fear she fell like one dead. My pipe saved her from the venom of the reptile, and knowing nothing of thee and thy distress, I bore her in, and placed her on thy bed. There her swoon passed into refreshing slumber. I left her so, and when at a later hour I sought her, lo! she had fled."

"Fled!" repeated Flash Lightning, wonderingly. "Without saying anything?"

"Ay."

"But why should she do that?"

"I have meditated thereon. Mayhap she awakened, and finding me with the serpents, fled in fear."

"And you followed her?"

"Not so."

"And why not? She could have told us all."

"Enough," said the old man, decisively. "I placed myself in the hands of Providence, and was directed to thee."

Puzzled by the snake-charmer's evident reticence, Flash Lightning yet refrained from pressing him further.

Presently Old Rattlesnake asked guardedly:

"Know'st aught of this girl, other than thou has just told me?"

"No," replied Flash Lightning, "I never saw her but once before."

"Wilt tell me the time, and circumstance, and what passed between ye, if aught?"

"It must have been two months ago. I was on the cliffs above the gulch I told you about, and heard the baying of a dog, evidently fighting with some animal. Running to the spot, I found a doe lying bleeding on the ground, and beside it a blood-hound and a wild-cat fighting desperately. Only a few paces from them stood this girl with a small rifle. And watching her chance, she dispatched the cat before my eyes."

"She told me that the cat had dropped upon the doe, and then the dog had gone in."

"I cut the doe's throat, and then offered to skin it and take the hind-quarters to the girl's home. While she admitted that she lived somewhere in the gulch, she begged me not to follow her, or try to find out anything more about her, or to speak of her in Virginia City."

"Of course I let the thing drop, and that was the last of it. Now you will have to follow the trail of the horse to find where Arthur is."

Flash Lightning waited for some comment on his story, but Old Rattlesnake, having made him comfortable, left him with no further reference to Berenice.

Taking the trail of the horse, as Flash Lightning had suggested, the naturalist followed it to the gulch, where his quick eye soon detected the curtain of vines torn by heedless passage.

Lifting the curtain he peered into the mouth of the cave.

All was dark, but from the cavernous depths issued a low moaning, wailing sound.

Listening, the old man determined that it was the voice of a woman in distress.

Entering then without fear, he ran against a curtain. Knowing nothing of the internal arrangements of the cave, he paused, and called out!

"Fear not, whoever may be in affliction, for I come to succor. I pray thee, strike a light, that thou mayst make known to me the whereabouts and surroundings that I may minister to thy needs."

Pausing for a reply, he received none; but the wailing sound continued, as if the sufferer were in too great distress to heed him.

As he could do nothing but lose his way in the dark, he returned to the open air, and made search for a splinter of pine which might serve as a torch.

Soon he had a murky flame which he could bear about with him; and re-entering the cave, he proceeded to an inner apartment, where he came upon Aunt Sue, kneeling beside the empty couch which Arthur had occupied, wringing her hands and weeping and moaning in the keenest grief.

As Old Rattlesnake entered with the light, she turned and looked at him.

The light fell full on his face and on hers.

With a look of wild inquiry on her face, her plaint suddenly frozen into silence, the poor, insane creature rose slowly to her feet and advanced falteringly, step by step, until she grasped the wrist of the hand in which he held his torch, and peered breathlessly into his eyes, with her face scarcely more than a foot from his.

Then, without warning, she uttered a piercing shriek, and let go his wrist.

At the same instant a sharp ejaculation escaped the snake-charmer's lips—the torch fell from his nerveless grasp, to be extinguished at his feet—and they were wrapped in utter darkness!

Old Rattlesnake heard a dull thud, and knew that the woman had fallen to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

A TERRIBLE BARGAIN!

WHAT pen can describe Berenice's feelings!

She saw murder, utterly ruthless, in Patent-leather Joe's eyes, and in Arthur's a total unconsciousness of his peril.

Indeed, after the first greeting, Arthur's mind passed from the gambler altogether.

"Berenice, is not the sun very hot?" he said. "Let us sit down here in the shade. I feel so very weak, and my head is like a ball of fire."

He sat down in the shadow of a rock, and plucking a small reed with a ligulate flower, began to pull out the petals, smiling, and saying alternately, as children do:

"You love me!—you love me not! You love me!—you love me not!"

The pathos of his simple sport, in such utter ignorance of the awful peril that threatened him, and in such tragic contrast with it, wrung the girl's heart. She knew that it only steeled the soul of his waiting murderer.

"So!" sneered Patent-leather Joe. "A new phase of the game, and an interesting one, I assure you. This, then, is the way your courtship has been conducted?—'You love me!—you love me not!' No doubt you culled flowers that would make the issue accord with your wish."

"There has been no courtship between us," said Berenice, restraining her tears by an effort of pride.

"Indeed!" sneered Patent-leather Joe. "Considering that there had been no previous interchanges of tenderness, I found my betrothed wife in a very strange attitude on my return this morning!—and again but a moment ago!"

"Whether you believe it or not, it is the truth. Except on the occasions you have mentioned, he has never uttered a word to me or committed an act which would be improper if I were already your—your—toward any married woman. And he knew nothing of our relations."

She stammered wretchedly in avoiding reference to herself as his wife.

Patent-leather Joe noticed it with a sardonic smile.

"It was natural that you should conceal the trifling fact of your betrothal, while you were making love to him."

"I did not think of it; and I have never made love to him."

"Well, I have a better memory; and you will find that it was easier to throw away the ring that you wore than to evade the obligation it symbolizes—at any rate, by marrying him!"

And Patent-leather Joe scowled his murderous hatred at his unconscious rival.

"I have no intention of evading my obliga-

tion to you, nor have I thrown away your ring," said Berenice, in a dead sort of way, and drew the ring from the bosom of her dress.

Patent-leather Joe stared at her.

"What! you have worn the ring?" he cried, incredulously.

"It has never left me."

"And there were never any love passages between you until to-day?—and those were not of your seeking?"

"No."

"And you have always intended—and still intend—to marry me, and not him?"

"I passed my word. I have always intended and still intend to stand by it."

The girl was as pale as death; but there was a directness about her answer that would not admit of doubt.

There was a dead silence, broken by the pleasant voice of the delirious Arthur, saying:

"You love me!—you love me not! You love me!—you love me not! Ah!"

He ended with a sigh, putting his hand to his head.

The girl shivered at the tragic significance that his words derived from circumstances. It was the mocking of a cruel fatality!

As for Patent-leather Joe, a fierce thrill of exultation illuminated his face with an almost lurid glow.

"Why, then!" he cried, "all I have to do is to crush this reptile that lies in my path, and be happy!"

And taking a step forward, he raised his weapon to execute his thought on the instant.

Arthur had raised to his feet, so that he presented a fair mark.

With a scream Berenice sprung before him.

"Stop!" she cried. "I have promised to marry you; but you shall not harm him!"

"You love him!—you love him!" cried Patent-leather Joe, frantically. "Oh! you have been deceiving me!"

"I have not deceived you. You will have me as your wife. Let that content you. But you shall not harm him who has never injured you."

For the first time Arthur's clouded mind seemed to realize that there was trouble.

Putting his arm about Berenice's waist, he drew her back of him, and glaring at Patent-leather Joe, demanded:

"Who are you? Dare you insult this lady?"

The action maddened Patent-leather Joe; and the murder that leaped into his eyes agonized the girl with dread.

With the quickness of lightning she snatched Arthur's revolver from his belt, cocked it, and placed the muzzle at her head.

"See!" she cried. "If you dare to harm him, I will kill myself before your eyes! He is wholly at your mercy; but if you kill, I shall never live to be the wife of his murderer!"

Patent-leather Joe shrunk back with horror and dismay.

"Don't!—for God's sake, don't, Berry!" he cried.

"I leave you to determine!" cried the girl, recklessly.

"Oh! what is this jugglery? You promise to marry me, yet you love him!—you show it in every act!"

"I would save his life—"

"What is his life to me? He may live a million years, if he does not stand between you and me!"

"Let it be a bargain: then, I will marry you, and you shall cease your ruthless quest of his life."

"You swear to marry me?"

"Yes; but if you ever attempt to injure him in any way, I shall consider myself absolved from the pledge."

"Agreed! agreed! I have got you cheap! Let him live forever! Come! we have no further need for his company."

And Patent-leather Joe held out his hand to Berenice, to take her away from the man who owned every throb of her heart!

CHAPTER XIII.

"I AM YOUR MOTHER!"

PATENT-LEATHER JOE would have taken his betrothed away at once, and left his rival in his helplessness alone there among the mountain crags. What cared he, if in his delirium Arthur hurled himself over a precipice, or whether he became a prey to wild beasts, or died alone and forgotten, with no hand to hold a cooling draught to his fevered lips?

"Come!" he said, and grasped her wrist.

"We have no further need for his company!"

"What! would you desert a man in delirium of fever, and leave him exposed here in the mountains?"

"Why not? He got himself into the scrape. Let him get out of it the best he can."

"Of course he shall accompany us until he can be given over to proper care," she said, with quiet decision, taking Arthur's hand.

"That was not in the bargain," said the gambler, with a jealous kindling of the eye. "I agreed to let him alone on condition that you would let him alone too."

"Common humanity would imply it as a part of our bargain," she said, bitterly. "Come, we are wasting time in idle debate."

And she walked forward, leaving Patent-leather Joe to follow.

The gambler yielded with a sullen frown.

As they entered the gulch which Berenice had so long known as her home, the shades of night were beginning to fall.

The silence of the birds and the chill of night-fall struck to Berenice's heart with a sense of desolation. It seemed as if the glade were the abode of death.

Purposely she avoided the spot where she knew Nero lay. She had a sigh and a tear for his memory.

They entered the cave.

All was still and dark as the grave!

Berenice's heart beat wildly. What had happened to Aunt Sue since she had last quitted her? Could she have been killed in that dread struggle from which both Arthur and Walt bore such ghastly marks?

"Will you strike a light?" she asked, in a failing voice.

Patent-leather Joe groped across the apartment, until he stumbled against some obstruction lying on the floor.

A hollow groan sounded through the cave! The gambler uttered a startled oath.

A moment later he lighted a dip.

Aunt Sue was discovered lying in the middle of the room. A thin stream of blood had run from her mouth and stained the matting that covered the floor.

Old Rattlesnake had come and gone, though none of the party assembled knew aught of him.

With a cry, Berenice ran to Aunt Sue and knelt beside her.

"Oh! have you been injured?" she cried, in a piteously quavering voice.

The woman looked at her and smiled faintly, as she returned the clasp of her hand with a just perceptible pressure.

"Is this your work?" demanded Berenice, turning upon Patent-leather Joe with blazing eyes and dilating nostrils.

"She was all right when I left," he said. "I haven't touched her. She's broke a blood-vessel, I reckon."

"Help me to get her on the bed," said Berenice, coldly.

With some difficulty they made the transfer, Patent-leather Joe showing no sympathy for the woman's sufferings.

"I'm going to town now," he said, when it was done. "I'll get horses and somebody to take care of these two, and then we can get out of this."

The girl looked at him, but refrained from reply, and he went out.

Arthur was walking back and forth in one of the rooms, muttering to himself. His delirium was taking a violent turn.

Berenice went to him and persuaded him to lie down. Having administered such a simple remedy as she knew to allay the fever, she returned to Aunt Sue.

Though very weak, the woman was conscious, and in her face was a light Berenice had never seen there before. She was perfectly rational!

Her lips moved, and her eyes looked their appeal.

Berenice bent her ear to the lips.

"Bend lower, for I cannot speak loud," she whispered, "and I have much to tell you. I have received a shock that has brought me my death and, through the mercy of God, my reason."

"All my life that has been measured by the span of your existence comes to me dimly, as I can recall the impressions of partially-lucid intervals."

"I know that you are Berenice, whose love has never failed me. You have known me as a poor demented creature who claimed your pity and your love because of her helplessness. What more has the man you call Walt told you of me?"

"Nothing;—oh! absolutely nothing of you, or of myself!" sighed Berenice, with intense long-

ing in her eyes. "He has put me off again and again. I know only that you are Aunt Sue and I am Berenice!"

The woman sighed, and gazed searchingly into the girl's face.

"What have you asked him?" she said.

"Oh! to tell me about my mother!—my dear mother, whom I cannot remember ever to have seen!"

A faint flush came into the woman's cheeks.

"Do you love her so much, knowing nothing about her?" she asked.

"Love her!" repeated Berenice, clasping her hands and raising her tearful eyes heavenward. "Oh! Aunt Sue, I have lain awake nights, and longed to have her come to me, if only in a dream! I have wondered whether she was like you, if you are really my aunt. Oh! I don't know for certain that you are! I have studied your face and looked at my own in the glass, and I think that I look like you—a little—don't I? And if you are my aunt, you must know about her—my dear, dear mother!—and oh! you will tell me!—will you not?"

"Would you like your mother to look like me?" asked Aunt Sue, and her eyes read the girl's face narrowly.

"Oh, yes!" said Berenice, affectionately, "only not so sad and worn; for I have loved you very, very dearly, Aunt Sue!"

Tears sprang into the eyes of the dying woman.

"Kiss me!" she whispered.

Wondering, yet with unmistakable tenderness, Berenice complied.

"And now you will tell me? Oh! I have so longed to know!"

"Can you find place in your heart for such a wreck?" sighed Aunt Sue. "Worn and sad, as I am, I am what is left of—your mother!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AUNT SUE'S STORY—"CHEESE IT, CULLY!"

"MY mother!—you! Oh, Aunt Sue!" cried the girl, excitedly, clasping the hands of the woman and gazing into her face.

"Can you accept me—can you love me as your mother?" asked the woman, with infinite longing and tenderness.

For reply the girl sunk on her knees beside the couch, clasped the withered form in her arms, and burying her face in the emaciated neck, began to sob and murmur between her kisses.

"My mother!—oh! my own dear, dear mother!"

Tears oozed between the closed eyelids of the dying woman, and her lips moved in thanksgiving to the Power that had crowned her long life of shadow with this golden sunset.

Presently she said:—

"Dearest daughter, while my strength lasts I must finish my story."

"I do not wish to impose upon others all the blame for what was in part due to my own wickedness and folly."

"When I was scarcely older than you are now I had two lovers; and I confess that my vanity led me to encourage both of them. When at last I married one, the other upbraided me violently, and threatened to be revenged."

"Afterward he apologized and sought again the friendship of my husband and myself. I learned too late that it was only for the accomplishment of his scheme of revenge. He still loved me with a desperate passion that was resolved to take me from my husband."

"So subtle was he that he ingratiated himself into my husband's confidence until he became our most intimate and trusted friend. My poor Frederick knew not the name of jealousy."

"For a year all went smoothly, and a son, whom we named after his father, was given to us."

"Perhaps six months after his birth, Andrew Ashurst began to undermine my confidence in my husband's love and truth. How he did it I cannot now say. It took long months for its accomplishment, so wily and patiently did he work; and when at last he offered me indubitable proof of my husband's faithlessness with a woman whose beauty had brought ruin into at least two families of my acquaintance, I felt so outraged that I was ready for any act of retaliation."

"In my desperation I thought nothing of myself or my children; for I was then expecting your birth at no distant day. But I resolved at any hazard to cut my husband to the heart (through his pride, for I doubted his love for me), by anticipating him. Before the world knew his faithlessness to me, it should know that I had deserted him."

"This thought was instilled into my mind by Andrew Ashurst; and I consented to fly with him if he would show me my husband in the company of the woman of whom I was so bitterly jealous.

"He showed me the two together. I thought my husband guilty, though I now believe him to have been the victim of a plot.

"How I got home I know not. But I was left for a few minutes. Then he came back to hurry me into the carriage that was to bear me away from husband, home, honor—everything but my revenge and my children. I had my boy in my arms. I would have parted with life sooner than give him voluntarily up.

"I noticed that my tempter was wild with excitement, but I asked him no questions.

"At the carriage we were met by a spectacle which froze my blood. My brother approached, bearing my husband on his back.

"My Frederick was wild-eyed, and as pale as a corpse, with blood streaming over his face and clothes. He cried out to me:

"Agatha! Agatha! in God's name, what are you about to do?"

"Then the man who had made me forget all that is womanly deliberately shot before my eyes the man I had sworn at the altar to love, honor and obey!

"When I awoke from the deadly swoon in which I fell at the spectacle and the delirium that followed it, you was born and my boy was not with me! That was Andrew Ashurst's one act of cruelty to me. He said that the boy looked so much like his father that he could not bear the sight of him.

"The loss of my child together with the shock I had received induced the melancholy insanity under whose cloud you have always known me. It was a blessing in that it saved me from further criminality with the man who had wrecked my life."

The woman stopped, breathless.

"And this Andrew Ashurst?" gasped Berenice. "Who is he? Do I know him?"

"You call him Walt!"

The girl rose to her feet with a look of horror on her face.

At that instant there was the sound of a footstep. The curtain was put aside, and Patent-leather Joe stood in the room.

"Come!" he said. "I have brought people who will attend to these two. They are just without, and will enter the cave as soon as we leave. I have got horses. We will be miles away from here before daylight, and you will have fulfilled your contract. Come!"

The girl lifted the tallow dip and held it so that its light fell full upon her face, that he might see its terrible expression—its deathlike pallor, its blazing eyes, its quivering nostrils!

These words fell from her white lips:

"Andrew Ashurst!—betrayed of my mother!—murderer of my father!"

For an instant Patent-leather Joe stood like one turned to stone. Then he cried:

"Hah! has she told you? Well, that shall not interfere with my purpose! The insanity of the mother thwarted me after I had braved all the world to gain possession of her! Now that I have waited day by day and year after year, seeing the daughter grow into the image of what I loved once and forever—now, Heaven nor hell shall deny me!"

And with a stride forward he clutched the girl's wrist.

Aunt Sue uttered a shrill scream and half rose on her elbow; but the blood welled into her mouth and she sunk back unconscious.

Before Berenice could make an effort to free herself, a voice was heard crying:

"Cheese it, cully! I've brought your death-warrant!"

Patent-leather Joe turned his head, glaring defiance.

Arthur Hamilton had arisen and entered the room, still held in the thrall of delirium.

Just before him was an old man bearing a younger one on his back. The face of the latter was ghastly with pallor and stained with blood.

Patent-leather Joe let go his hold on Berenice's arm, and shrunk away with a cry of agonized terror.

CHAPTER XV.

OLD RATTLESNAKE'S STORY—FACE TO FACE!—PATENT-LEATHER JOE ESCAPES.

WHEN the torch dropped from Old Rattlesnake's hand and he heard Aunt Sue fall to the ground, he stood for perhaps a minute perfectly motionless.

Then trembling from head to foot, and muttering incoherently to himself, he groped his way out of the cave, and continued under the spur of the excitement to which the sight of Aunt Sue had given rise, until he reached his own home and Flash Lightning's bedside.

"Hallo, Nunky!" cried the youth. "What's in the wind? Did you find him? What's the matter?"

"Boy!" cried Old Rattlesnake, seizing the wrist of his nephew, "thou hast no time for illness; thou must be up and doing. In the first shock of discovery I ran away; but now I am come again to the possession of my senses; and it behooveth us all greatly that I return without delay, not unaccompanied by thee. Know that thy mother liveth!—she whom I have long considered as one dead!"

"My mother!" cried Flash Lightning, rising on his elbow in amazement.

"Hitherto I have denied thy importunity, and told thee naught of her," said Old Rattlesnake, sadly; "but now is the fullness of time, and I mistake me greatly, if much floweth not from this day's doings."

"My mother!" repeated Flash Lightning, with a far-away look in his eyes. "Take me to her at once!"

"Canst sit thy horse?" asked Old Rattlesnake, anxiously.

"I can do any thing that takes me to her!" cried the youth.

And rising to a sitting posture, in spite of the pain, he let his feet slip to the floor.

That he might mount with the least difficulty, Old Rattlesnake brought the horse into the hut, and exerting that great strength to which his aged appearance was as a mask, lifted him upon the animal's back.

In spite of the caution with which they picked their way, his horse's every step caused Flash Lightning a throes of pain. Yet he sat with compressed lips, permitting no moan to escape him.

"And now, while we are going to her," he said, "tell me about my mother."

"That, I have so long denied thee," replied Old Rattlesnake, "arose not from unkindness, but rather that thou mightest reach man's estate before thy life was clouded with the story of man's iniquity. So in the ripeness of thy reason mightst thou judge fairly and mercifully, nor do aught of injustice to one who loved much, and who hath suffered much."

With this introduction, he told Flash Lightning the story of woman's love and jealousy and man's treachery, the substance of which the reader has already received from the lips of one of the principal actors.

"Thy father was a just man," he added, "loving her whom he had taken to heart with a love so perfect that, as he was incapable of doubting her, so he took no thought that any act of his might be viewed with distrust."

"Andrew Ashurst knew the human heart well—both thy father's unquestioning trust in all men with a fair seeming, and thy mother's strong love that might easily be fanned to jealousy. And the creature utterly vile, suborned to the iniquitous office of the siren, joined to that beauty which might well fire the jealousy of the one, a plausibility which would lull the distrust of the other."

"It was no task to her craft to lure the simple, chivalrous man to her house; for though her acts were abominable in the sight of God, yet had she done nothing but what society views leniently in one possessed of wealth and position; and when she told her tale of sorrow with tears and distress, such as lendeth to beauty its greatest charm, and clung to thy father's hand, craving such help from him as would be no dishonor to him who granted or her who received, he had no suspicion of her treacherous purpose."

"So by the evil machinations of Arthur Ashurst thy mother saw them, and questioning nothing of what the deceiver whispered in her ear, fled, making no sign."

"I alone doubted Andrew Ashurst, and on the eve of the tragedy which overwhelmed thy father's house sought my sister. Her manner and that of the false friend confirmed my fears that there was collusion between them. So I sought thy father and told him that his own hearthstone demanded his watchfulness."

"Doubting his wife in nothing, thy father's wrath against the friend who had courted him only to betray, knew no bounds. They met and thy father fell before Andrew Ashurst's bullet."

"Then the traitor fled, and thy father caused me to bear him on my back in pursuit."

"At the door of the carriage which was to bear thy mother to undying regrets and vain

remorse we overtook them; and once more the murderer's hand was raised.

"Thy mother swooned, and would have fallen but for the arm of her betrayer. As it was, her baby—thou—slipped from her lifeless arms to the ground; and when she was lifted into the carriage and borne away ye were separated."

"Thy father lived long enough to consign thee to my care, and to commission me with full forgiveness for the wife who had forsaken him, conjuring me to spare no effort to save her."

"Thou knowest how throughout the years of thy life I have fulfilled my duty to thee. I have now found her, and may yet return to bear to her sore heart her husband's forgiveness and blessing."

"As for thee, I adjure thee, judge her not harshly. She is thy mother, and in the happy day her love for thee filled the measure to overflowing. Of her purity of heart, I, who have watched her, holding her as the apple of my eye, do assure thee."

"When the wreck of what was once my beautiful sister gazed into my eyes, and shrieking, recoiled, I saw that the burden of her sorrows had bereft her of reason. In dismay I fled, thinking only to get thee."

"Now, canst receive her, looking only to that which would move thee to love and pity? Speak!"

Flash Lightning was greatly moved by this narrative.

Looking straight before him, he clutched the pommel of his saddle with unconscious tenacity.

"And where is Andrew Ashurst?" he asked, in a hoarse voice.

"Of him I know nothing," replied Old Rattlesnake. "Since the dread day that stained his hands in thy father's blood I have never seen or heard aught of him. To-day I found thy mother in solitude."

Flash Lightning remained silent.

After looking up at him anxiously several times, and noting the settled expression of his face, Old Rattlesnake again broke the silence.

"Canst receive her, boy, in all forgiveness and love?"

A wave of color appeared faintly in the youth's pale face, and a tender humor glistened in his eyes.

"Is she not my mother?" he asked, in a low, tremulous voice whose cadences could have but one significance.

The old naturalist laid his hand on that of his nephew.

"I am not disappointed in thee. Thou hast thy father's magnanimity," he said. "As God hath restored ye one to another after all these intervening years, let us accept it as a sign that it is His will that as she nursed thy infancy, so now shalt thou not deny succor to her infirmity."

They entered the gulch and approached the wire curtain, where Flash Lightning was taken on his uncle's back, to be carried into the cave.

They were just about to enter when they heard some one approaching.

"Let him precede us," whispered Flash; and Old Rattlesnake shrunk with his burden into the deep shadow.

The moon which had risen since Patent-leather Joe had left the cave enabled Flash Lightning to recognize him on his return; and when the gambler had disappeared beyond the vine curtain, Flash drew his revolver and said:

"Ah! if that gentleman is in the case I shall have need of unanswerable arguments!"

As for Old Rattlesnake, at sight of Patent-leather Joe he was so shocked that it seemed as if he would sink beneath his burden.

"Ah!" he reflected, sadly, "it is as I feared. All these years hath she given herself to the destroyer. Yet can I never doubt that my mother's daughter was true and pure of heart. For she budded and bloomed by my side. Like as an open book hath her soul lain before my vision. But the shock of believing that her great love was betrayed hath left her distraught. Agatha, my sister, bitterly hast thou been sinned against. May the merciful God write this over against thy fault!"

"It is plain that the boy recognizeth not the destroyer in this man. Then will I not quicken his understanding, lest in the moment of wrath, seeing the strait to which his mother hath been reduced, he be moved to mete violence to him who hath caused her suffering."

With this thought Old Rattlesnake refrained from identifying Patent-leather Joe with Andrew Ashurst; and Flash Lightning, expecting to see a much older person in his mother's early suitor, saw in the gambler only one at enmity with him and his partner, Arthur Ham-

ilton. With this latter association in his mind, he did not think to question what were the relations between his mother and Patent-leather Joe.

So they entered the cave.

They were just in time to witness Patent-leather Joe's assault upon Berenice; and thinking only of her protection, Flash Lightning leveled his revolver and cried:

"Cheese it, cully—I've brought your death-warrant!"

But Patent-leather Joe's guilty conscience gave another significance to the words. Instantly he recognized the old naturalist; and from the strong resemblance between Flash Lightning and his father, brought out by the accident of the son's being borne into his presence just as the father had been, it seemed to Patent-leather Joe almost as if the intervening sixteen years had been blotted out, and the old scene were being re-enacted, the mother's place now being occupied by her daughter.

Gamblers are superstitious, and Patent-leather Joe invested this coincidence with a supernatural significance. With a thrill of horror, he conceived that he stood face to face with his death, brought about in a manner which bore a direct relation to his crime.

It was this that froze his blood and turned him to stone, as he shrank away and glared at Flash Lightning as at an avenging Nemesis.

Then through the agony of superstitious terror came the instinct of self-preservation. He was not one to give up, even when he felt that he was fighting against Fate.

But his sense of the hopelessness of the struggle made him fire almost at random, aiming neither at the combined figure of Old Rattlesnake and his burden, as if they together constituted a being that must be removed from his path.

Old Rattlesnake received the bullet in his body, and sunk upon his knees.

Although Flash Lightning returned the shot promptly, his aim was disconcerted; and he sprawled upon the floor of the cavern, over the snake-charmer's head.

With a yell of exultation, so great was the reaction from the incubus of fear that had paralyzed him, Patent-leather Joe bounded past his foes on his way to escape from the cave.

But he was confronted by another obstacle in the person of Arthur Hamilton. He was in the height of delirium, his face flushed with fever, his eyes staring wildly.

At sight of him a wave of intense hatred surged up from the gambler's heart, and thrusting his pistol almost into his face he fired, yelling:

"Die! You shall at least never have her!"

Before this fierce assault Arthur Hamilton went down, and, all obstacles removed from his path, Patent-leather Joe bounded out of the cave, mounted his horse and dashed away into the night!

CHAPTER XVI.

REUNITED!—A LIFE DEVOTED TO REVENGE.

"AFTER him! after him!" cried Flash Lightning, struggling to his knees, though in less excitement he might have fainted with pain of his fall.

But Old Rattlesnake, whose injury, though painful, was not serious, replied:

"Nay, boy! it would avail thee nothing. But rather attend, thy mother. Pray God that the hand of death hath not fallen upon her."

"My mother!" cried Flash Lightning, gazing at the unconscious woman.

"Oh! can you not revive her?" he added, addressing Berenice. "She is my mother, whom I have never seen within my recollection."

"Your mother?" cried Berenice. "Your mother! She has just told me that she was my mother."

"God be praised!" aspirated Old Rattlesnake.

"Child, I knew thee when first my eyes rested upon thy young beauty, so like to hers in the day when happiness smiled upon her. Nay, fear me not," he added, seeing that Berenice now recognized him and shrank trembling away; "I am thy mother's brother—one whom she loved greatly, and who hath loved her unceasingly through all the years when I thought her dead."

But not until the dying mother had been again restored to consciousness did the brother and sister fully realize the relationship which was so old and yet so new and strange to them. She placed them hand in hand, and craved their forgiveness for that act of hers which had separated them even before they had been united, and blessed them with her dying breath.

As for Old Rattlesnake, he had nothing but

love for the sister, his affection for whom had been expended in watching over her son; and her gratitude to him blended with her gratitude to God for this happy yet sad reunion before death.

So she passed away.

By Patent-leather Joe's last attempt on Arthur Hamilton's life, Berenice was relieved from the hateful obligation that hung its iron manacles on her young life. Freed from all fear, she entered again upon the sweet task of nursing him back to health and strength, and when he arose from his bed of pain, her arm aided his first weak steps.

It was a sweet time, and culminated in that solemn ceremonial when God's blessing fused their two lives into one.

There was but one cloud on Berenice's bridal. Her brother was not there.

Flash Lightning's recovery had been much more rapid than Arthur Hamilton's; and as soon as he could ride his horse he entered upon a mission to which he had devoted his life while he stood beside his mother's dead body. It was the most wretchedly mistaken end to which a life can be turned—*revenge*!—yet Old Rattlesnake tried to dissuade him in vain.

"Vengeance is mine saith the Lord—I will repay!" quoted the old man.

To which Flash Lightning replied:

"The blood of my father—the wrecked life of my mother—cry out to me for revenge!"

"Nay, boy," still urged his uncle, "it ill-be-seems thy years."

Flash Lightning drew his revolver.

"This leaves no advantage to the old over the young—the strong over the weak!"

So he set out on the trail of Patent-leather Joe!

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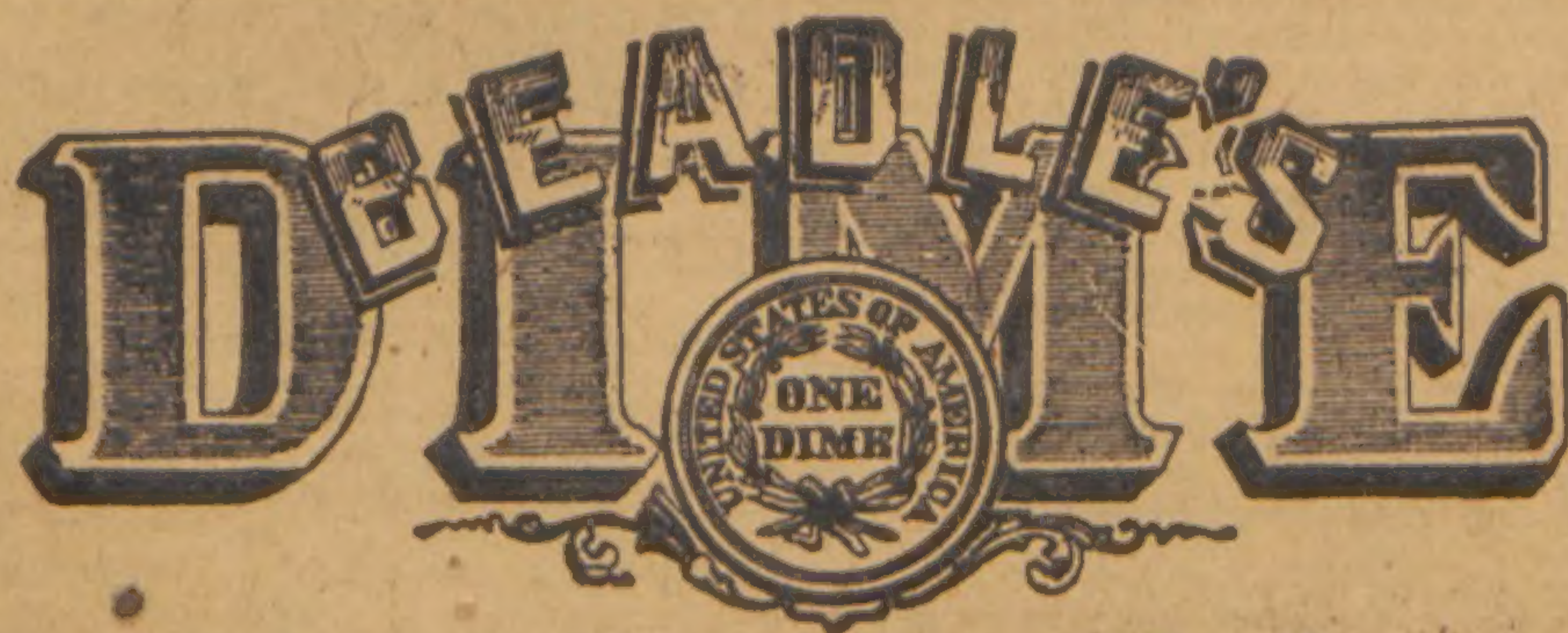
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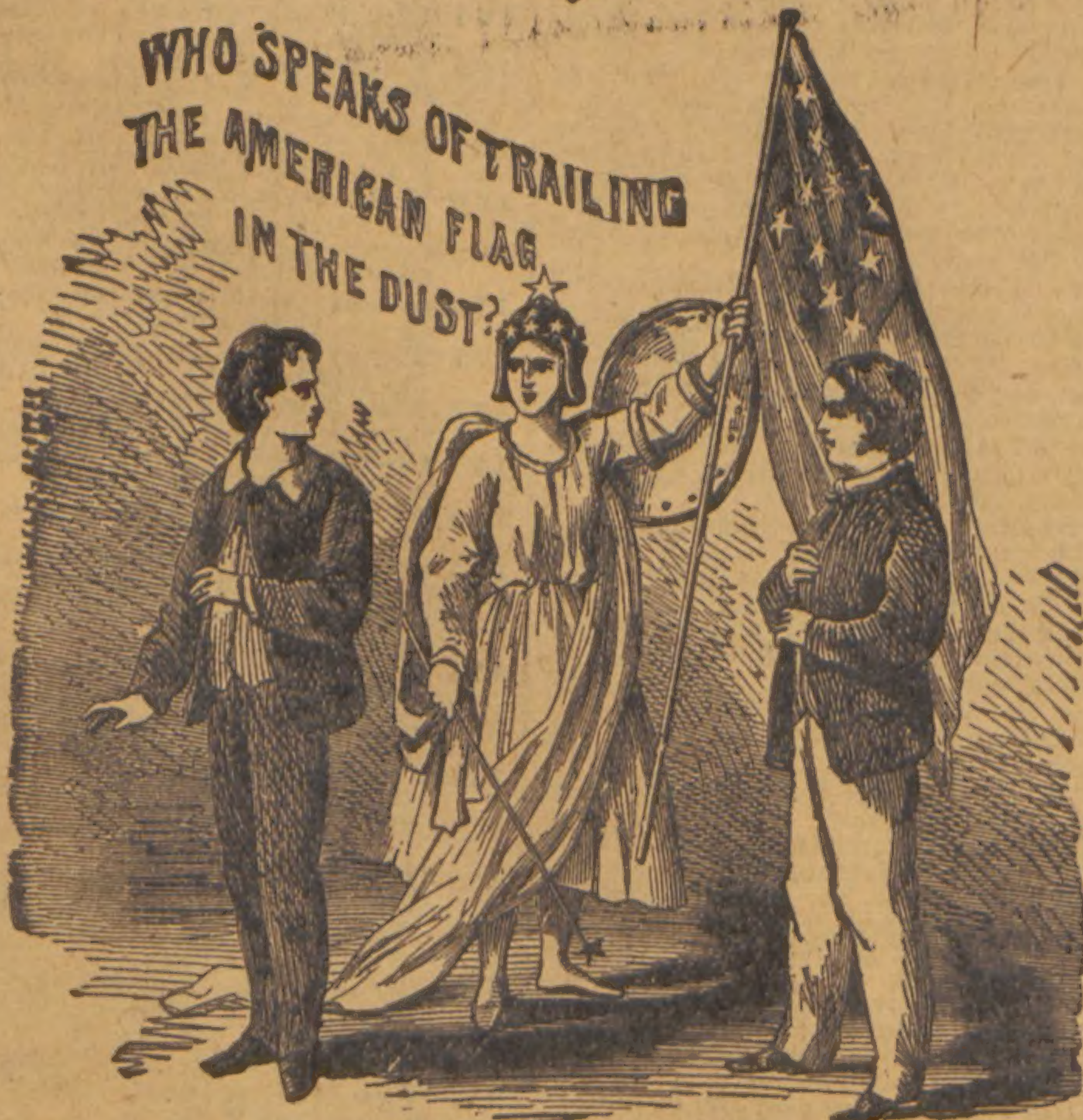
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